THE·LITTLE·HOUSE IN·THE·FAIRY·WOOD

·ETHEL COOK ELIOT·

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"IN THE DIM LIGHT HE SAW A LITTLE LOW HOUSE, WHOSE WINDOWS WERE GLOWING LIKE NEW, WARM FLOWERS." — *Page 8.*

THE LITTLE HOUSE IN THE FAIRY WOOD

BY

ETHEL COOK ELIOT

WITH THREE ILLUSTRATIONS IN COLORS BY MABEL HATT

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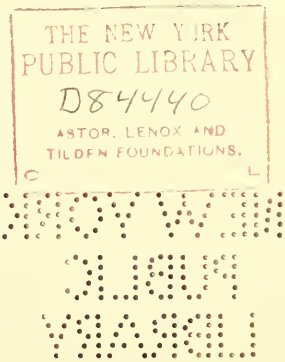

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THE LITTLE HOUSE IN THE FAIRY WOOD

CHAPTER I

MAGIC IN A MIST

THAT morning began no differently from any morning, though it was to be the beginning of all things new for Eric. He was awakened early by Mrs. Freg's rough hand shaking him by the arm, and her rough voice in his ears: "Get up, lazy-bones! *All* you boys pile out, this very minute! It's six o'clock already!" Then she reached over Eric and shook the other two boys in the bed with him, repeating and repeating "Wake up, wake up! It's six o'clock already!" When she was sure the three boys in the bed were awake and miserable, she crossed the room with a hurried, heavy tread and clumped, clumped down the stairs into the kitchen.

Though it happened just that way every morning, and it had happened so this morning, this day was to be very different from any other in Eric's life. But Eric could not know that; so he crawled farther down under the few bedclothes he had managed to keep to himself, and shut his eyes again just for a minute.

The night had been a cold one, and the other two boys in the bed, because they were older and stronger, had managed

to keep most of the bedding wrapped tightly around them, while little Eric shivered on the very edge. So he had not slept at all in the way little boys of nine usually sleep,—that is, when they have a bed to themselves, and their mother has left a kiss with them. When he had slept, he had dreamed he was wading in icy puddles out in the street.

But it was only a minute that he huddled there, trying to come really awake, and then he sprang out, and without thought of a bath, was into his clothes in a minute. The two older boys followed him more slowly, yawning, growling, and quarreling.

Breakfast was served in the kitchen by Mrs. Freg. The room was bare and ugly like the rest of the house, and the food was far from satisfying. As the older boys got most of the bedding for themselves, so they got most of the breakfast, while Mr. and Mrs. Freg laughed at them, and praised them for fine, hearty boys who knew what they wanted and would get it.

"You will succeed in the world, both of you," said Mrs. Freg with mother-pride gleaming in her eyes, when they had managed to seize and divide between them little Eric's steaming cup of coffee,—the only hot thing he had hoped for that morning.

"Will I be a success, too?" asked Eric in a faint but hopeful voice.

"You!" said the harsh woman. "You, young man, had better be thankful to work on at the canning instead of starving in the streets. That's the fate of most orphans. Success indeed! Now hurry along, all of you. It's quarter to seven."

But right here is where the day began to differ from other days. Eric did not hurry along. He threw down his spoon and cried, "I'd just as soon starve in the streets, and wade in

its icy puddles, too, as live here with you and your nasty boys and work in that old canning factory! I just wonder how you'd feel if I went out this morning and never, never came back! I'd like to do that!"

Mrs. Freg laughed, and her laugh was not a nice mother-laugh at all, for she was not Eric's mother, and had never pretended that she was.

"Why, little spitfire, it wouldn't matter a bit except to make one less mouth to feed. But you won't be so silly as that. You don't want to starve."

"All right," said little Eric, snatching his cap from its peg. "You said it wouldn't matter to you. You won't see me again, any of you. I hate you all, and everything in the world. I hate you. You've made me hate you hard!"

Then he suddenly ran out into the street.

In a minute he was in a flood of people, men, women and children moving towards the canning factory, a big brick building on the outskirts of the city. Eric had worked in that factory from the day he was seven. There is no need to tell you what he did there, for this is not the story of the canning factory Eric,—the queer, hating Eric who had waked up that morning.

But how he did hate! His eyes were full of hating tears, and they were running down his face, making horrid white streaks on his dirty cheeks. He was hating so hard that he did not even care if people saw his tears. He lifted his face straight up and dropped his arms straight down at his side and walked right along, no matter how fast the tears came.

Now he had often hated before, but never quite like this. Before, it had been a frightened hate, a gnawing, hurting thing deep down in his heart. But to-day it was a flaring hate, a burning thing right up in his head. It was big, too,

because it included everything that he knew, Mrs. Freg, her boys, the street, the people jostling him, and hottest and wildest of all the canning factory. How terrible to go in there in the morning, when the sun was only just up, and not to come out again until it was quite down! Eric knew little about play, but he did know that if he could only be let stay out in the sunshine he would find things to do there. If they'd only let him try it once!

So he walked along in the direction the others were going, the hating tears in his eyes and on his face. But no one laughed at him, and no one asked him what was the matter, even the other children. For he was not crying in the usual way with little boys. He was walking along with his head up. So people did not bother him.

He had reached the outskirts of the town, and was almost in the shadow of the big, cruel factory, when the Magic began to work. For there was magic in this day that had started so badly. It was only waiting for Eric to see it before it would take hold of him and carry him away into happiness. It had waited for him at the door of the dull, bare little house that had never been home to him, but his tears would not let him see it. So it had followed along beside him all the way to the factory, waiting for him to feel, even if he could not see. And he did feel,—just in time to let the Magic work.

He felt that the day that had begun so freezingly was warm, strangely warm. He wiped the tears from his eyes away to the side of his face with his sleeve, and looked about. The sun was very bright, but in a mild, pleasant way. And a tree on the other side of the street was showering softly, softly, softly, yellow autumn leaves, until they covered the cobblestones all around. Eric did not think about being late. The Magic was pulling him now. He went across and stood

under the tree, and felt the leaves showering on his head and shoulders, and caught a few in his hands.

All the people passed, and soon the last one was hidden behind the heavy factory door. Eric gave the door a glance or two, but did not go. Over the roof of the factory he saw the tops of tall trees waving. He had never looked so high above the factory before. But he knew there was a wood on the other side, a wood he had always been too tired to think of exploring, even on holidays. Now he saw the tops of the tall trees beckoning him in a golden mist. "The mist is the yellow leaves they're dropping," thought Eric. With every beckon the golden mist of leaves grew brighter and brighter, until he could not see the beckoning any more, but only the mist. Still he knew the beckoning was going on behind the mist.

"If I'm to live in the streets at night," he thought to himself, "there's no need to live in the factory by day. I'll just go and see what those trees want of me."

Very slowly, with little firm steps, he went by the factory door, and then around under its windows to the wood at the back.

It was Indian Summer. That was why the golden leaves were showering in a mist, and why the sun was so warm.

Eric dropped his ragged coat and cap on the edge of the wood,—it was so warm,—and went in.

A little girl had been watching him from her place at one of the factory windows where she was sorting cans. She had seen him before, working at the factory, day after day, and they had played together sometimes in the noon half hour. Now she wondered what he was doing out there. Had they sent him, perhaps, to do a different kind of work that could only be done in the woods? But as he walked away

in under the trees farther and farther, the golden mist that was over the wood drew in about him; and although she leaned far forward over the cans at a great risk of knocking over dozens and setting them rolling,—he was lost in it. It had dropped down behind him like a curtain.

CHAPTER II

THE BRIGHT HOUSE

ERIC knew nothing of the little girl and her thoughts. He was walking in a golden mist, but he could see quite perfectly, and even far ahead down long tree aisles. At first the trees did not grow very close together, and there was little underbrush. Several narrow paths started off in different directions,—straight little paths made by people who knew where they were going. But Eric did not know where he was going, so he struck off in a place where there was no sign of a path. Soon the trees drew closer and closer together, until their branches locked fingers overhead and shook the yellow leaves down for each other. The leaves showered softly and steadily. Eric's feet rustled loudly in them.

Soon he stopped and took off his worn shoes and stockings. He left them where he took them off and went on, barefoot. Now that he was only in his shirt and trousers he began to run and leap. He leapt for the drifting leaves, and he ran farther and farther into the happy stillness.

The trees crowded and crowded, and the mist of leaves grew brighter and brighter. No birds sang, for they had all flown away for the winter, and there were no flowers. But the drifting leaves hid the bareness, and magic covered everything.

After Eric had run and leapt and waded in the crackling

pools of leaves for a long time, he grew hungry. "But there is no food here," he thought; "and anyway it doesn't matter. It's much better to be hungry here than in the dirty streets."

He decided to go to sleep and forget about it. So he lay down in the leaves. They fell over him, a steady, gentle shower, and he slept long, and without dreaming anything.

But when he woke he was cold. And worse than that, the golden mist had faded. It was almost twilight. The light was cold and still and gray. While he slept Indian Summer had vanished and its magic with it.

Now no matter how fast Eric ran, or how high he jumped, he was chilly through and through. But he did not think of trying to find the way out of the wood. The streets would be as cold as the forest, and never, never, never, if he starved and froze, was he going back to that house in the village where he had lived but never belonged. So he went on until the gray light faded, and the soft rustle of falling leaves changed to the noise of wind scraping in bare branches. When he was very cold, and ready to lie down and sleep again to forget, he came quite suddenly on an opening in the trees. In the dim light he saw a little garden closed in with a hedge of baby evergreens. The wind was rustling through the stalks of dead flowers in the garden. But in the middle of it was a little low house, and the windows and doors were glowing like new, warm flowers.

Yes, it was a house and a garden away there in the wood, but no path led to it through the forest, and there was a strangeness about it as about no house or garden Eric had ever seen.

Although no path led through the wood to the house, a path did run through the garden to the low door stone. Eric went up it and stood looking in at the door, which was open.

The glow of the house came from a leaping, jolly fire in a big stone fire-place, and from half a dozen squat candles set in brackets around the walls. It was the one lovely room that Eric had ever seen. It was so large that he knew it must occupy the whole of the little house. But in spite of all the brightness, the corners were dim and far.

There were two strange people there, or they were strange to Eric because they were so different from any people he had ever known. One was a young woman who sat sewing cross-legged on a settle at the side of the fire-place. About her the strangest thing was her hair. It was not like most women's,—long and twisted up on her head. It was short, and curled back above her ears and across her forehead like flower-petals. It was the color of the candle-flames. But her face was brown, and her neck and long hands were brown, as though she had lived a long time in the sun. Her eyes that were lifted and scarcely watching the work in her hands, were very quiet and gray.

She was watching and talking to a little girl who was skipping back and forth between a rough tea-table set near the fire and an open cupboard-door in the wall. She was carrying dishes to the table, and now and then stopping to stir something good-smelling which hung over the fire in a pewter pot, with a strong bent twig for a handle.

The child was strange in a very different way from her mother. The mother, one could see, was merry in spite of her quiet eyes. But the child was pale. Her face was pale and little and round. Her hair was pale, too, the color of ashes, and braided in two smooth little braids hanging half way down her back. She moved with almost as much swiftness as the fire-shadows, and as softly too.

Both mother and daughter were dressed in rough brown

smocks, with narrow green belts falling loosely,—strange garments to Eric. And their feet were bare.

But stranger than the house, stranger than the people in it, was the fact that the mother was talking to the little girl just as people of the same age talk to each other; and though Eric was shaking with cold and aching with hunger, he could still wonder deeply at that.

"It's a long way 'round by the big pine," she was saying; "but you see I am home in time for supper. Suppose I had not come until after dark. What would you have done, Ivra?"

The little girl stopped in her busy-ness to stand on one foot and think a second. "Why, I'd have put the supper over the fire, lighted the candles, and run out to meet you."

"Oh, but you wouldn't know which way to run. I might come from any direction."

"I'd follow the wind," cried Ivra, lifting her serious face and rising to her tiptoes, one arm outstretched, as though she were going to follow the wind right then and there.

It was at that minute they noticed the door had blown open, and that a little boy was standing in it, looking at them.

But they neither stared nor exclaimed. Ivra ran to him, her arms still outstretched in the flying gesture, and drew him in. His dirty face was streaked with tears, and his legs and feet were blue with the cold. They knew it was not question-time, but comfort-time, so the mother folded an arm about him, and Ivra skipped more rapidly than ever between the cupboard and the table. Almost at once supper was ready, and the table set for three. As the last thing, Ivra brought all the candles and set them in the middle of the table. They sat down,—Eric with his back to the fire. It warmed him

through and through, but their friendly faces warmed him more.

Very little was said, but when the meal was nearly over Ivra asked him how long he was going to stay with them. Immediately he stopped eating and dropped his spoon. His eyes filled with tears. He had utterly forgotten about his plight until then,—how he was homeless, workless and bound to starve and freeze sooner or later. Ivra's mother saw the misery in his face and quietly spoke, "We hope for a long time. As long as you want to, anyway. Three in a wood will be merrier than two in a wood. . . . If you like me I will be your mother."

Ivra clapped her hands. "Stay always," she cried. "I will be your playmate. There will be many playmates besides, too, and I will help you find them."

Eric glowed. The hatred that had been flaring in his head suddenly faded, and the heavy thing that had been his heart for as long as he could remember, became light as thistledown. He looked at the mother and the kindness in her eyes made him tremble. "I will stay and be your child," he said.

CHAPTER III

FIRELIGHT

WHEN supper was done the three put away the supper things, carried the table back to its place in the corner, and set the candles in their brackets about the walls. Then almost at once the mother said it was bath-time and bed-time.

Bath-time! Baths had been rare in Eric's life, and when they did happen were unhappy adventures,—cold water in a hand basin in the kitchen sink, a scratchy sponge, and a towel too small. So if Mrs. Freg had said "bath-time and bed-time" to him now, he might have run away. But if Ivra's mother said it, it must be. She was *his* mother too, now, and he loved her and thought her beautifully strange.

A surprise was waiting for him. The bath was a deep basin set in the wall. There was a fountain in it that one had only to turn on to have the basin fill with clear water. Eric slipped out of his ragged shirt and trousers and climbed up into it. The fountain came splashing down on his dusty, shaggy head, falling in rivulets down his back and breast. He was like a bird taking a bath; there was such happy splashing and dipping.

But no bird had ever the gentle soft drying, or was wrapped in such a warm night gown as the mother found for Eric. It was one of Ivra's night gowns, but quite large enough. Then she tucked him into a narrow couch far from the fire. It was the first time Eric could ever remember having slept alone.

Ivra was already in a bed against the opposite wall. Before the mother got into hers, which was open and ready for her, she blew out all the candles and opened the door and windows.

"Good night, my lambs," she said, and a very few minutes afterwards Eric could see by the firelight that his mother and playmate were asleep.

How cold the wind felt as it blew over his face! But how warm and snug his body was, there in the soft, clean night gown between the light, warm blankets! How fine to be there so warm in bed while his cheeks grew red in the cold air and burned deliciously. How could he ever sleep? He was too happy!

He looked at the fire. And then he looked harder. It was not a fire at all, but a young girl, all bright and golden, sitting with her head drowsily bent forward on her knees and her arms wrapped close about her legs. But as he watched she slowly lifted her bright head, and looked quietly about the room. Then she gradually and beautifully rose and stepped out of the fireplace onto the floor. Slowly she moved across to the mother's couch and stood still as though looking down at her. Slowly she bent and drew the bed-clothes higher about her shoulders, and kissed the flower-petal hair curled back on the pillow.

She moved then to Ivra's couch, still slowly and very beautifully, and Eric could see her smile at the little one huddled there, half on her face, one arm thrown up over her head. Gently the fire-girl rolled her into a relaxed position on her side, tucked in the flung arm, and kissed the closed eyelids.

Then she stood a minute, looking away, Eric did not know where. But his heart began to ache with wonder and longing. Would she come to him too—or was he only a stranger?

He lay still, watching her from his dark corner. At last she

stopped looking away, and came across the floor to him. She brought all the brightness of the room with her, and her feet made no sound on the boards. When she stood above him he shut his eyes, though he wanted very much to look up into her face. She bent down and her hands smoothed his covers, warmed his pillow and lay still for a minute like sunlight on his cheek.

When he opened his eyes again, she had gone back to the fireplace, all her brightness with her, and was resting there, a drowsy, golden girl, her head bent forward on her knees and her slim arms wrapped close about her legs.

Eric lay and watched her for many sleepy minutes while her light fell dimmer and dimmer, lower and lower. When it was just a tiny flicker he dropped to sleep.

CHAPTER IV

THE GOSSIP

HE slept long and deeply, for when he woke he felt rested. But he did not open his eyes. "It must be time for Mrs. Freg to shake me," he was thinking. "Until she does I'll just stay as I am and pretend it wasn't a dream, but real." For although he remembered very well all that had happened to him yesterday, he could not believe it was true.

So he lay still in his snug bed, wondering that Mrs. Freg's boys had left him so much of the bed-clothes. "How fine to have a little time to pretend a dream!" he said to himself. But Mrs. Freg did not come and did not come, until at last he opened his eyes, just in wonderment. "It must be six o'clock!"

When he saw where he was, and that the dream was true, his heart almost stood still for joy. He was indeed far away in the woods, safe and snug and warm in this bright house, and Mrs. Freg could never reach him here. And he would not go to the canning factory that day, nor the next, nor the next, nor ever again. The new mother had said so. His happiness brought him up in bed wide awake, and then he got out. He had not learned to bound out yet, but that came.

The fire was burning merrily. All was in order, the beds made and pushed back against the wall, the hearth swept, and some clusters of bright red berries arranged above the fire-

place. But where were Ivra and Helma?—Ivra had called her mother "Helma" last night, and so it was that Eric already called her and thought of her. There was not the tiniest sign of them.

Oh, but yes. There on the floor near the hearth lay a little brown sandal, one of its strings pulled out and making a curlycue on the floor. That must belong to Ivra. The fire, the red berries, and the little, worn sandal, seemed to be wishing Eric a good morning and a happy day. There was plenty of mush in the pot swinging over the fire, and on the table drawn up to it, a wooden spoon, a bowl, and a jug of rich cream. So they had not forgotten him. They had only let him sleep as long as he would. They must have stolen about like mice, getting breakfast, clearing up, and tidying the room; and then closed the door very softly behind them when they went out.

And wonder of wonders! After yesterday's Indian Summer, outside it was a wild winter day. Gusts of snow were hurling against all the windows of the house, and blowing a fine spray under the door. Eric with his face against a windowpane could see only as far as the evergreen hedge because the trees beyond were wreathed in whirling snowclouds. The dead flowers in the garden were hidden under the blowing snow. The little straight walk up to the door was lost in it, and the footprints Ivra and Helma must have made when they went away were hidden too.

Something red blew against the hedge. For a minute Eric thought it was a big bird. But it found the opening and came through, and then he saw it was a little old woman. She came briskly up to the house, a red cape blowing about her, sometimes right up over her head, for because of the jug she was carrying she could not hold it down. She walked in

without stopping to knock and was as surprised to see Eric there as he was to see her. But she got over it at once.

"Good morning," she said cheerfully, going across the room, whisking a pitcher out of the cupboard and emptying her jug of milk into it. "This is the milk for them, and it's as much as ever that I got here with it. The wind is in a fine mood—pushed me here and there all the way through the wood, and tried to steal my cape from me, say nothing of Helma's milk! Perhaps some of the Wind Creatures wanted them, or it might be old Tree Man himself, looking for a winter cape for his daughter. But I said, 'No, no. The milk is for Helma and little Ivra! I take it to them every morning and I'll take it this morning whether or no, so pull all you like—cape or milk you'll not get. The cape has a good clasp, and I've a good hold of the jug. Pull away!' "

Here the old woman—the pitcher put away, and the cupboard door closed—dropped down on the settle and waited for Eric to speak. She was a jolly little old woman, one could see at a glance. Her face was the color of a good red apple, and just as round and shiny. Her eyes were beady black, bright and quick, and surrounded by a hundred finest wrinkles, that all the smiles of her life had made. Her mouth was pursed up like a button, out of which her words came shooting, quick and bright and merry.

Eric stood looking at her, not thinking to say anything. So after the briefest pause she went on, peeping into the pot.

"I see you have some mush here, so as I've come all the way from the farm and am ready for a second breakfast after my tussle with the wind, I'll share it with you. Or perhaps you have had yours already."

"No, no," cried Eric, suddenly remembering how hungry

he was and hoping she would not take it all. "I have just waked up."

"So. Then we'll breakfast together," and away she flew to the cupboard again and brought out a second bowl and spoon. Then she stirred the mush round and round a few times and dished it up. Eric noticed that she divided it exactly evenly. She flooded both bowls with cream, and together they sat down to it. What a good breakfast that was, and how fast the little old woman talked!

But in spite of all her talking and flying around she had looked Eric up and down and through and through, and made up her mind what kind of a person he was. What she saw was a pale little boy of nine in a ragged shirt and trousers, and barefooted. His hair was shaggy and unbrushed but tossed back from a wide brow. His mouth was sullen. But she forgot all about shabby clothes, unbrushed hair, and sullen mouth when she came to his eyes. They were wide and clear, and returned the old woman's keen glance with a gaze of steady interest. Sullen and pale, but clear-eyed—she liked the little stranger. And so she went on talking.

"I bring them milk every day. It's a long way here from my farm, but not too far when it's for them. Helma's gone into the village, hasn't she? When I came to Little Pine Hill this morning the snow stopped whirling for a minute, and I caught a glimpse of her a-striding across the fields. It's a fine way of walking she has—like the bravest of Forest People! When I reached the Tree Man's the wind didn't stop for me, but I spied that child, Ivra, just where I knew she'd be,—racing and chasing and dancing with the Snow Witches out at the edge of the wood. 'It's a pity she can't go with her mother,' I said to myself when I saw her, 'and not be wasting

her time like that. The Snow Witches are no good to any one. But——' "

Eric interrupted there, having finished his mush and pricking up his ears at the mention of witches.

"Are they really witches?" he cried. "And have you seen them yourself?"

"What else would they be?" asked the old woman. "They're the creatures that come out in windy, snowy weather, to dance in the open fields and run along country roads. Ordinary people are afraid of them and stay indoors when they're about. Their streaming white hair has a way of lashing your face as they rush by, and then they never look where they're going. They care nothing about running into you and knocking the breath out of you. Then, they're so cruel to children!"

"But Ivra isn't afraid of them!" wondered Eric.

"Not she," said the old woman. "She runs *with* them instead of away from them. When I saw them back there they had all taken hands and were leaping in a circle around her. She was jumping and dancing in the center as wild and lawless as they, and just as high, too. . . . But it's a pity she isn't with her mother all the same, going on decent errands in the village. Only of course it's not her fault, poor child! She daren't go into the village."

"Why *daren't* she?" asked Eric.

"*How* dare she?" cried the old woman. "She'd be seen, for she's only part fairy, of course. But hush, hush!"

She clapped her hands over her mouth. "What am I telling you,—one of the secrets of the forest, and you a stranger here! You must forget it all. Ivra's a good child. Now don't ask me any more questions, or I might tell you more."

But Eric had begun to wonder. What did it mean, that Ivra was part fairy? And why wasn't it safe for her to be seen

in the village? And were there really witches, and was she playing with them out there in the wild day?

The old woman was talking on, but he heard no more.

Then the door blew open in a snowy gust of wind, and there stood Helma, the mother, her arms full of bundles, her cheeks ruddy from the wind, and her short hair crisp and blown.

CHAPTER V

WORLD STORIES

NOW Eric learned that the old woman's name was Nora, for that was what Helma called her, and seemed glad to find her there. She stayed on only long enough to see what Helma had brought in her bundles, and then started out for the farm, drawing her red cape closely about her this time, and not blowing much as she walked briskly to the gap in the hedge. Once through she disappeared quickly in the high drifting snow. Hardly had she gone her way when Ivra came from another, jumping the hedge and reaching the door in three bounds.

Helma had bought a good deal of thick brown cloth in the village and a strip of brown leather. It was all for Eric. She had noticed his lack of shoes and stockings last night, and that his worn clothes were much too poor and thin for winter in the forest. To-day, while she sewed for him, he would have to stay in. That was a pity, for it is such fun out in a storm. By night, though, all would be finished.

"And that is good!" exclaimed Ivra. "For to-night the Tree Man has asked us to a party. We're going to roast chestnuts and play games, and there's to be a surprise, too. The Tree Girl called it all out to me as I passed just now. She put only her head through the door, for the snow came so suddenly it caught her without a single white frock,—only a bonnet. But that was pretty. It has five points like a star, mother."

"The Tree Girl," said Eric. "What a queer name! But how did she know about me to ask me too? *Did* she ask me?"

"I told her about you. And of course she asked you. You are my playmate!"

Helma pulled a table to the settle and sat down with all the brown cloth before her, a work-basket, and shears. But first she measured Eric for his new clothes.

"You may make the leggins, if you want to," she said to Ivra, "and when you come to a hard place tell me and I will help. You may even measure them yourself. . . . We're the only Forest People, Eric, who wear anything but white in the winter. Most Forest People like to be the color of their world. They often laugh at us. But I like brown. Ivra makes me think of a brown, blown leaf, and now here will be two of them! You can blow together all over the forest."

Eric's eyes swam in sudden, happy tears, but he only said, "*Nora* wore red."

"Oh, she's not one of us," laughed Helma. "But she's lived close to us so long, she is able to see us. We aren't afraid of her. She's a good neighbor."

But why *might* they be afraid of such a nice old woman, Eric wondered. He was to learn sometime, and much beside, for this was the beginning of new things for him, and his mother, Helma, and Ivra were strange people. But how he loved them!

"Now that we are settled at our work, and nothing to interrupt, what shall it be?" asked Helma. She and Ivra were sewing briskly, one in each corner of the settle. Eric was stretched on the floor, looking now into the blaze, and now up at the windows where the snow tapped and swirled; for to-day,—Helma had said,—was to be a rest day for him. It was the first rest day he could remember, and how *good* it

was! To know he could lie there with no cans to sort or label for hours, and no Mrs. Freg to boss him about when work was over! There were to be no more cans for him forever, and no more Mrs. Freg. Helma had said that quite firmly. He believed her and was so happy that he trembled. And so, it being true that never again should he go back to that unchildlike life that had frightened him so, and tired him so, all the breaths he drew felt like sighs of relief, and he turned his shaggy little head on his arm, crooked under it, and watched Helma's flying brown fingers with glad eyes.

"What shall it be?" asked Helma.

"Oh, World Stories, please," said Ivra, drawing her feet up under her as she bent over her sewing.

"Eric probably knows very few of the World Stories," said Helma. "So sometime I shall have to go back to the beginning and tell them all over for him."

"And I'll stay and hear them over again too!" cried Ivra, dropping her work to clasp her hands. "I love to hear stories over."

"Why, better than that, you might tell them yourself. Would you like that?"

"Oh, yes—if I can. Do you suppose I can, mother Helma? I shall begin at the very beginning, way back before men were in the world at all, or fairies even. He'd like to hear about the big animals. And you will listen, mother, to see that I get it all right?"

Now these World Stories of Helma's were wonderful stories, but all true. They began way back when the Earth was young. There were stories about the Earth itself, how it hung in space and turned, making day and night. When the strange, great animals that by-and-by appeared on the Earth and have since gone from it first came into the stories, and

then, later, the floods and glaciers, and at last the first man,—any child might have listened with delight and wonder. Ivra had listened so ever since she was a tiny girl, old enough to understand at all. And with man, and the wonderful happenings that came along with him, Ivra had begged for the stories day and night, and never could have enough of them. For then in a great procession came the stories of cities and nations, of great men and women, of explorations and adventures. They led in turn to stories of languages and writing, of painting and geometry, of music and of life. The names of these things may not promise good stories to you, but that is only because you do not know them as stories. If you could listen to Helma telling them, by the fire, or out in the starlight, deep in the wood, or swinging in a tree-top,—then no other stories you might ever hear would satisfy you quite. So perhaps it is as well you do not know now just where Helma's little house is standing deep in the wood under the snow.

Ivra always said that the nicest thing about the stories was the interruptions. Helma never minded them, and she answered all the questions Ivra asked. She answered them by making things that Ivra could see with her own eyes, by drawing pictures on the ground or in the ashes, building with earth or snow, playing with wind and water, and in a hundred other ways. Sometimes the answer to a question would take up the playtime of a whole day.

But now Eric was to hear his first story, World Story or any other kind. Can you imagine how it would feel if to-day you were to hear the first story of your life?

"All ready?" asked Helma.

The silence in the room said plainer than words that all was ready for the World Story. This time it was a story about

a man named Saint Francis, and a story after Eric's own heart.

Almost as fast as the story went the work of Helma's fingers. But Ivra was neither so swift nor so skilled, and the leggins were dropped many times from forgetful hands because all her thoughts were gone away following the story.

Yet somehow the leggins got done, and the jacket and trousers got done, and even a little round cap, and all before dusk. For a finishing touch Helma sewed two soft little brown feathers she had picked up in the snow one on either side of the cap,—which gave Eric, small as they were and soft as they were, a look of flying.

Then nothing remained but the sandals, and because Eric was well rested by then, he was allowed to help at them. They were cut from the strip of brown leather, and Helma showed Eric how to shape them and sew them himself. So after supper he stood attired, all in brown, a pale, happy child, ready for his first party.

Ivra and Eric were to go to the Tree Man's party alone, for Helma was going far away from the wood to spend the evening with a comrade. It was to be a very long walk for her, for she put on her heaviest sandals and pulled the hood of her cloak up over her hair.

She walked with the children as far as Little Pine Hill. It was a low hill, bare of trees, except for a dwarfed pine on the top. In summer the slope was slippery with the needles of the little pine, but now it was several inches deep in snow. It was bright starlight, and far away down an avenue of trees, Eric saw shining open fields, and beyond them the lights of the town.

There Helma said good-by. Eric looking up at her in the starlight saw her hair like pale firelight under her dark hood

and her eyes so calm and friendly. He clung to her hand for a minute.

"Have a good time," she told them. Ivra leapt away and Eric after her. Helma stood watching until their little forms had flickered out of sight among tree-shadows. Then she sped down the starlit avenue towards the open fields and the town.

CHAPTER VI

AT THE HEART OF A TREE

IVRA and Eric ran until the stars were almost lost to them under the snow roof of the forest. Once Eric stopped to tie his sandal-string which had loosened and was bothering him. Then the stillness of the world startled him.

He cried to Ivra to wait, and she came back to his side. "Don't be frightened," she comforted. "There are Forest People near us. They would walk with us, for some of them are going to the party too, but they are afraid of you. That's why they've drawn their white hoods over their heads and keep away. Once we are inside the Tree Man's, though, it will be all right. They'll come in too, and not be afraid any more."

"But why are they afraid of me?" asked Eric, tugging at his sandal-string. "No one else has ever been afraid of me. Even Juno, Mrs. Freg's cat, who was afraid of 'most every one, liked me and jumped into my lap. Why are the Forest People afraid?"

"Well, they are Forest People, you see, and you are an Earth Child. Mother and I weren't afraid of you, of course, because,—we aren't exactly Forest People."

Ivra paused and the silence came back. Eric looked up at her.

"Are you cold?" he asked.

"No, no." But she began to jump up and down and knock

her heels together to get warm. Eric still struggled with his lacings. Ivra stopped jumping and went down on her knees in the snow to straighten them out for him. Eric's fingers were awkward with knots, and besides, now, they were numb with the cold. But Ivra had everything right in a minute. She crossed the strings over his instep and tied them snugly above his ankle almost before he could think.

Then they ran on. In starlit spaces Eric caught glimpses of hurrying figures, so swift and light he could not tell whether they walked or flew. Their cloaks sparkled white in starlight until he was not sure but they might be starbeams, and not Forest People at all.

One suddenly started up just at his elbow, and was away like the wind. Ivra began to run and to call after it. "Wild Star! Silly Wild Star! It's only I, Ivra, and my playmate. Wait for us!"

Eric followed her, running as fast as he could, but the snow held him back, and all the trees in the forest seemed to gather to stand in his way. Ivra came back to him, laughing. "They are *so* afraid of you! No one will come near us until the Tree Man is there to protect him."

Soon they came to a big beech-tree standing in an open space with smaller beeches making a circle around it. The starlight showed, strangely, a narrow door in the trunk. Ivra pushed it open and Eric followed in after her, wondering at going into a tree.

They were on a flight of stairs lighted by starlight from a window somewhere high up. At the head of the flight they came to a door, and through the crack beneath it streamed a warmer light than starlight. Ivra opened that door gayly, and through it with her, Eric went to his first party.

It was the jolliest room in all the world. The firelight and

candlelight did not reach so far as the walls, but left them in soft darkness. So Eric had the feeling that the room was really much too large to be inside of a tree. But in spite of its bigness, it was very cozy. The fireplace was in the middle of the floor, just a great hollowed boulder, heaped with crackling twigs.

The candles, red, green, yellow, brown and orange, stood circlewise on a table by which the Tree Man sat, carving a doll out of a stick. A workbasket on the table was overflowing with bright threads and pieces of queer cloth.

Eric saw these things because just for a minute he was too shy to look at the people in the room. Almost at once he had to look at the Tree Man, however, for he came and shook him by the shoulders. Eric had been shaken by the shoulders before, so he shrank away. But this was very different from Mrs. Freg's shakings. The Tree Man was chuckling, not scolding, and the dark eyes that Eric looked up above the long white beard to find were friendly and wise.

"Do not fear us, little Earth Child," he said. "It is we that have cause to fear you. You have only to blink your eyes, pretend to be knowing, and we are nothing. But your eyes are so wide and so clear, we trust you. Ivra told us there was not the tiniest shadow in them, not even the shadow of a leaf. Only hunger. But we're not afraid of hunger. Come, have a good time at the party."

Then the Tree Girl, the Tree Man's daughter, came to him. She was shy, and shook all her soft brown hair about her cheeks. A circle of little yellow leaves kept her hair from her eyes, which, in spite of her bashfulness, were steady and kind like her father's. "I am glad you are here," she said. From that minute Eric felt at home in the tree.

Eric and Ivra were the first of the guests. The others per-

haps had been too scared to come. But soon knock after knock sounded at the door, and in flocked the Forest People who had been invited.

First came the Bird Fairies, five of them together, merry and good little creatures as ever lived in the wood. They had arrived only that day from their summer homes in the far north, 'way up among the snow-barrens. They always spent the winter in this wood, living in the empty birds' nests and spending their time making up songs to teach the birds that would come back in the spring. Bird Fairies cannot sing a note themselves, nor carry an air, but they make up fine songs for the spring birds, who while they can sing with beautiful voices really have but few ideas.

They are fluffy, cuddly, swift little creatures, tiny and quiet. One might think them of little account just at first, but not for long. For they are the farthest-traveled of all the Forest People, except the Wind Creatures only. Now they were fluttering in, and off came their white cloaks and forth they hopped in bright colors, little feet twinkling and pattering, little wings lifting and wavering. They gathered around the Tree Man, nestling in a row on his shoulder, running up and down his arms, giving all of the news of their long journey into his ear. He chuckled and chuckled and soon sat down by the table again, nodding his head with delight at the tales they were telling him.

Meanwhile, another group entered,—the Forest Children. The Forest Children are little girls and boys who live all by themselves in moss houses deep in the thickest of the forest, and know nothing of mothers, nurses or schools. They came tumbling, cheering, and skipping in, curls bobbing, eyes shining. When their white cloaks were taken off with the help of the Tree Girl and Ivra, it was plain to see that they had no

mothers. Their frocks were torn and stained, and half their sandal-strings untied and flapping. The Tree Girl sighed as she patted the bobbing curls into some order, tied the laces and straightened a buckle here and there.

Now the room was musical with sound.

The last guest arrived, Wild Star, who had run away from Eric in the forest. He was a Wind Creature. Wind Creatures are growing-up girls and boys who live near the edge of the forest. Like all fairies, they can only be seen by Earth People on a day that is clearer than a day should be, or by people like Eric who have no shadows in their eyes.

Wild Star dropped his bright white cloak as he entered. His wings were purple, the color of early morning, high and pointed. But they clapped themselves neatly down his back to avoid the ceiling. He was a beautiful boy, wild and starry, and that is how he got his name. Wind Creatures are strong and swift, a little too wide-awake and far-traveled to be very intimate with the Forest People. But Wild Star, though he was as swift and strong as any, often came to the Tree Man's, and often played with the Forest Children in their moss village for days together. He loved the Tree Man, and now he sat down cross legged by him, and laid his bright cheek against his knee.

So the party began.

CHAPTER VII

TREE MOTHER AND THE DROWSY BOAT

"LET'S play hide-and-go-seek," cried the Forest Children, for that is always their favorite game.

Up jumped Wild Star, down fluttered the Bird Fairies, in crowded the Forest Children, and the Tree Man counted out for them. He pointed his finger at each in turn while he said this verse, which he made up on the spot:

"Sticks are racing in the flood—
Trees are racing in the wood—
In the tree-tops winds are racing—
In the sky-tops clouds are chasing.
In the tree-heart snug and warm,
We hear nothing of the storm.

When we play at hide-and-seek,
It is *you* must count the sheep."

At "you" the finger pointed at Eric, and it meant that he was to be "It."

"Put your head here on my knee. Shut your eyes and count one hundred sheep jumping over a stone wall, not too fast," explained the Tree Man. "While you're counting the others hide. Anywhere in this room, and anywhere on the stairs. Out-doors is no fair."

"But *where* are the sheep?" asked Eric, "and how can I count them with my eyes shut?"

Every one suddenly looked puzzled. The Forest Children's eyes grew wide with wondering. The Bird Fairies fluttered uneasily. The Tree Girl seemed dazed. Wild Star said, "Why, we never thought of that,—where *are* they?"

But Ivra laughed and ran to Eric. She took his hand and said, "The sheep are inside your own head. Just shut your eyes and try to see them. It is very easy. The wall is low, and there's a place where the stones are beginning to roll down. The sheep go over there, one by one."

Eric shut his eyes and put his head down on the Tree Man's knee. And it began to happen just as Ivra had said. There was a green hill-pasture, a little gray stone wall slanting across it, and sheep, one by one, jumping where the wall was broken down, following their leader. He counted one hundred of them and then stopped although a dear little lamb was trotting down the hill, trailing the procession. He wanted to see if the lamb would be able to jump the wall too. But the Tree Man had said one hundred, so he stopped and opened his eyes.

Things were strange. The Tree Man was nothing but an old stump. The room felt very cold and it was bare. The fire in the boulder had gone out. But he heard a soft fluttering somewhere and took heart. The Bird Fairies! They might be hiding high, having wings. He went all around the room, looking up into the dusk. At last, there they were in a row on a beam, their wings spread over their eyes.

"Bird Fairies, I spy!" cried Eric, and ran towards the stump. But wings are swifter than feet, and the Bird Fairies reached the goal first.

He found Ivra at the top of the second flight of stairs, curled up in a shadow.

"I spy!" and he ran just as fast as he could down the

stairs. He was ahead of her to the door, and thought he would surely win. But she passed him in the room and touched the stump first.

The Tree Girl, of all places, was kneeling behind the stump. Of course she touched it the minute Eric spied her, and so she was safe.

The Forest Children were hiding, some in the hall behind the door, some on the stairs, one under the table. And everyone of them beat him to the goal and touched it first.

"Now there's only Wild Star," Ivra cried. "You must catch him, Eric, or else you'll have to be 'It' again!"

Wild Star was outside, up in the top of the tree in the starlight. Eric discovered him by seeing one of the tips of his purple wings which was caught in a crack of the sky door.

"I spy!" he called, and pulled the wing-tip to let Wild Star know he was found.

But of course Wild Star passed him like a flash, his strong wings beating down.

Tears of vexation welled in Eric's eyes. One thing he had gained though. Because he had found them all, even though he could not run so fast as they, the Tree Man had come back, and sat there in the place of the stump, and all was warm and bright again. The Tree Man had only wanted to prove for himself that Eric could see Wild Star, the Bird Fairies, and the others without Ivra to point them out to him. But he felt satisfied now that Eric's eyes were really clear, and that he would never hurt any of them by looking through them or pretending that they did not exist.

"Wild Star is It now," he said. "For he didn't play fair, going outside like that."

"Oh, I forgot outside was no fair," cried Wild Star, laughing.

So this time Eric hid with the others, while Wild Star counted sheep.

He ran wildly all round the room trying to find a hiding-place. But everywhere there was someone ahead of him. At last he came back to the Tree Man himself with Wild Star counting sheep at his knee.

"Ninety-five, ninety-six, ninety-seven," counted Wild Star.

"Oh dear! Oh dear!" Eric whispered to himself in despair.

Ivra was hiding behind the Tree Man, and so she jumped out and pulled Eric back to hide with her.

"Ninety-eight, ninety-nine, one hundred!"

Wild Star started up, and never thinking to look behind the Tree Man went circling the room in swift flight. He saw Ivra and Eric as he flew over their heads, of course, and they laughed and touched the Tree Man first.

But he caught most of the others, even the Forest Children who are so swift and clever.

After that, almost everyone had to take his turn at being It.

When the merry game came to an end at last, they gathered around the boulder fireplace. The twigs were glowing embers now and looked like myriads of golden flower-buds. Then the Forest Children began clamoring for a World Story. So Ivra climbed up on the Tree Man's knee and tipping her head back against his chest, looked into the fire and told one of Helma's World Stories. It was the story of a glacier. That may not sound like a very interesting story to you, but if you could hear Ivra tell it in all its wonder just as Helma had told it to her, you would never ask for a better story. No, you would ask for that one over and over again, as the Forest Children did the minute she was through.

But instead of telling that one over, Ivra told another, a

little story about some eggs and a brood of chickens. And they wanted *that* over. But there must be an end to everything, and so the Tree Girl brought out a bowl of beechnuts, and they forgot the stories, and ate as much as they wanted. There were apples, too, big and red and cold cheeked. Everyone was hungry.

When all were satisfied, there was sudden whispering among the guests. The Bird Fairies fluttered and hummed with excitement. The Forest Children's eyes began to shine expectantly. Ivra, who still sat on the Tree Man's knee, spoke what they were all thinking. "The surprise," she said to the Tree Man. "You know you promised us a surprise to-night. Is it time for it yet?"

"Yes," said the Tree Man. "It is. *High* time! Come, put on your cloaks. It's a cold night."

"But the surprise!" they all cried at once. "We don't want to go home until we have had the surprise!"

"Oh, the surprise is up in the branches. My mother is there with her air-boat, waiting to take you all home."

The Forest Children clapped their hands and jumped up and down until their sandal-laces that were not already loose and flapping came undone and flapped too. Wild Star sprang towards the stairs, his face alight. Ivra slipped down from the Tree Man's knee and ran to Eric.

"The Tree Mother! The dear, beautiful Tree Mother! We are to see her and ride with her!" she cried.

Then she dashed away for her cloak. The Forest Children, with the Tree Girl's help, were tumbling into theirs, wrong-end-to mostly, ripping off buckles in their hurry.

"The Tree Mother! The dear Tree Mother!" their little teeth chattered in ecstasy.

When all were ready they crowded up the straight starlit

stairs. At the top they crawled out through the sky door, one by one, into the branches. Eric followed Ivra, and saw a great black moth-like thing poised in air by the tree's top. But it was hollowed like a boat and a shadowy woman was standing upright in it. A dark cloak covered her, but the hood had fallen back, and her face in the starlight was very beautiful and very young, younger even than Helma's, whose face Eric had thought all that day too young and glad to be a mother's. How could this be the Tree Man's mother, he wondered,—the Tree Girl's grandmother! Then he saw that her hair was white, whiter than all the snow that lay in the forest.

It was very cold kneeling there and clinging in the tip of the great beech-tree. The forest below was still and dark. But the air and the wintry star-filled sky were bright with a blue, cold light. After the warmth at the heart of the tree, the cold was almost unbearable. Eric longed to wave his arms about, and jump up and down to get warm, but he had to cling, still and motionless, to the branches to keep from falling.

At last Ivra whispered, "It's our turn now," and taking Eric's hand, she made him jump with her right out into cold space. For one awful instant he thought they were both falling down, down to the ground. But they had only dropped into the air-boat. The Tree Mother leaned forward and pulled a blanket over them. Her eyes as she did it, looked straight into Eric's. They were dark, and deep as the forest shadows. He began to speak to tell her who he was, for her look was questioning. But she put her finger to her lips.

Then he noticed for the first time that every one was silent. Even the Tree Man and his daughter who stood in the tree top waving good-by spoke no words, only nodded and waved.

The last Bird Fairy fluttered noiselessly in. Eric lay back under the warm blanket, snuggled against Ivra. A Bird Fairy nestled into the palm of each of his hands. All was still and warm. The air-boat slipped away high and higher over the tree-tops and on and on.

On a cold, starlit night, nestled in feathery warmth, to sail over the dark tree-tops, high and higher and on and on—that is a wonderful thing. And when the Tree Mother stands above you, wrapped in her dark cloak with her face shining under her cloudy white hair, now and then bending to tuck the blanket more snugly about you—what could be more blissful?

Very soon Eric became drowsy against his will. His eyelids dropped like curtains shutting out the stars. But he roused when the boat stopped, hovered, and sank down like a bird until it rested on the crusted snow in the middle of a tiny village of tiny moss houses; only now, of course, the houses were covered with snow, and looked like baby Eskimo huts. The Forest Children crept sleepily out of the boat, kissing the Tree Mother good-by as though in a dream. Not a word was spoken. There was the creak of their little feet on the cold snow,—that was all. Each child went alone into his little house. They were lighted and looked warm through the doors, and Tree Mother nodded as though that were well. But before the air-boat had risen out of sight, the lights were all out, and the Forest Children sound asleep, snuggled into their moss beds.

From then on stops were frequent, and Eric woke at each one. At every Bird Fairy nest at which they stopped, the Tree Mother leaned from the boat and scooped the crusted snow out of the nest. Then when the Bird Fairy was settled down, she powdered the snow with her fingers until it was

"ON A COLD, STARLIT NIGHT, NESTLED IN FEATHERY WARMTH, TO SAIL OVER THE DARK TREE-TOPS, HIGH AND HIGHER AND ON AND ON—THAT IS A WONDERFUL THING."—*Page 38.*

soft, and heaped it over the little creature, who was already asleep.

Wild Star was left in the tip of the tallest tree in the forest. There he lay without covering, his face up to the cold sky, his arms flung back above his head, his wings folded tight. He half opened his slumbrous eyes on the Tree Mother as the boat floated away, but before the smile in them faded he was asleep.

There was straight, sure, even flying then to Helma's little house, set in its snowy garden,—and down they sank to the door stone. The Tree Mother carried Ivra, who was fast asleep, in in her arms. The fire leapt when they entered, until the walls and floor danced with light. The Tree Mother undressed Ivra, who never once opened her eyes, and tucked her into bed. Then she helped Eric, who was fumbling and missing buttons in a sleepy way. But he was awake enough to kiss her good-night. And that was the end of everything until morning.

CHAPTER VIII

A WITCH AT THE WINDOW

WHEN the children woke the next morning, there was no Helma. Her bed had not been slept in. They had been too sleepy the night before to wonder at her absence, but now they could hardly believe their eyes. The room was strange and lonely without her. The fire had died in the night. They sat up in their beds and talked about it.

"She always comes back before bedtime," said Ivra. "She has never stayed away before."

Eric said, "Perhaps that is why the Tree Mother brought you in and undressed you—perhaps she knew our mother had not come back. She looked wise, as though she knew everything."

"She does know everything,—at least everything in the forest. But did she bring me in, right in here in her arms, Eric!"

"And undressed you while you were sound asleep."

Ivra laughed with delight, and clasped her hands. "Truly, truly? The dear Tree Mother undressed me? Are you sure? Did she kiss me good-night?—" But suddenly she grew solemn. "Yes, she knew that mother was not here. She only takes care of those who have no one else. Well, we will have to wait for mother, that is all. She will surely come this morning."

But she did not come that morning, nor that day, nor for many days. You shall hear it all.

The children laid the fire, together,—shivering but hopeful. Ivra got the breakfast, teaching Eric, so that next time he could help. They chattered and played a good deal, and really had quite a merry time over it. It was only at first that Ivra was solemn over Helma's disappearance. Soon her good sense told her that Helma loved them both, and nothing could keep her long from her children.

After breakfast they washed and put away the dishes. Then they tidied the room. They hurried over it a little, perhaps, for it was a bright winter day, and all the forest was waiting to be played in. Before they ran out, they put a log on the fire that it took both of them to lift. If Helma should come back while they were away, she must find a warm house. Ivra skipped back after they were outside to set out a bowl and spoon for her, and stand the cream jug beside them.

Then away they fled, running and jumping in the frosty morning air. Ivra taught Eric some games that could be played by two alone. They were running games, climbing games, hiding games, jumping games. Ivra was swift and strong and unafraid. Her cheeks reddened like apples in the cold. She was a fine playfellow.

Not until they were hungry did they think of home. Then they ran, hand in hand at last, jumping the garden hedge like deer, their hearts beating with the expectation of running straight into Helma's arms. But no Helma was there. Nora had come with the milk, left it, eaten the rest of the porridge, and gone away again without waiting for a word with any one. The children wished she had stayed. They needed some one to talk with about their mother. Of course they knew she would come back, all in her good time. Ivra made Eric un-

derstand that. But the room seemed even emptier without her than it had in the morning. They cheered each other as best they could, drank a lot of the fresh milk and ate some nuts. They wanted to get away into the forest again and forget the empty house, so they did not try to cook anything.

They played hard all the afternoon. Towards twilight it grew warmer and began to snow, great wet flakes. They ran home, leaping the hedge again. The house was still empty. Helma was not there.

They stirred up the fire, and sat down on the floor in front of it to talk over what they should do. Then it happened,—the strange, the beautiful, the frightful thing! Eric saw a face at the window. It was so perfectly beautiful, that face, that he wanted to shut his eyes against it. It almost hurt. It was the face of a young woman, very pale, but when her eyes met Eric's they filled with dancing laughter. Her hair under her peaked, white hood glistened blue-black like a river in the snow. She lifted a small white hand and tapped on the window pane, nodding to him merrily.

Ivra turned at the sound of the little fingers on the glass. When she saw the face, she started to her feet with a frightened cry, and rushing to the door, drew the bolt.

"She can't get in. She can't get in, Eric. Don't be afraid. We are safe." But the poor little girl did not believe her own words. She was trembling.

"Why, I'm not afraid," said Eric, running to the window. The merry eyes drew him. Now her mouth danced into smiles with her eyes. She made pretty signs to him to open the window and let her in.

But Ivra pulled him back. "Don't you know? It's the Beautiful Wicked Witch!" she whispered.

But Eric was impatient. "How can she be wicked when

she's so beautiful!" he exclaimed. He was so little used to beautiful people in his life that now he was fascinated and delighted.

The Beautiful Wicked Witch looked at Ivra then, and Ivra saw how her eyes were dancing, great black eyes full of splendor and fun. She caught her breath. She laughed back at the Beautiful Wicked Witch. She could not help herself. But her hands flew to her mouth to stop the laugh.

"Shut your eyes, Eric. That must be best, not to look at her at all. That is what mother did when she came before. She bolted the door and then we sat down in front of the fire and never looked at the window once, while she told me a long, lovely World Story about Psyche and her little playmate Eros. Then when we had forgotten all about the Beautiful Wicked Witch, we looked at the window by accident and she was gone. Come, I'll tell you a World Story now, the same one."

But Eric hardly heard what she was saying. He moved nearer and nearer to the window. Ivra followed him, charmed by the laughing face there too. Then together they unbolted the windowpane and opened it outward. The Beautiful Wicked Witch stepped in.

"How silly to be afraid of me, children," she laughed. "I have only come to play with you."

"Oh goody!" cried both of the children together. For now that she was in the room all their fear and wonder had vanished.

It was dusk, and so they lighted all the candles and poked the fire, before they turned to entertain their guest. But the candles did not burn very well, very faintly and flickeringly,—and the fire fell lower and lower, instead of growing higher and higher as they nursed it.

"Don't mind about that," laughed the Beautiful Wicked Witch. "There's enough light from the window for us to play together in. We won't bother with the stubborn old fire and the silly little copy-cat candles. Come, what shall we play?"

But the children had been playing hard all day, and their bodies were tired. "Oh, tell us a story instead of playing," begged Ivra. "This is the time when mother tells her very best stories."

"Well, I am not mother," said the Beautiful Wicked Witch; "but I will tell you the best stories I can. Come sit near the window where the light is stronger. That fire will never burn while I am here. I am brighter than it, and the old thing is jealous."

The children laughed at her joke. But it was true,—she was very bright. Her eyes seemed to light the room, or perhaps it was her gown, like an opal fire, blue and pink and purple, changing and glowing, and made of the softest silk.

Ivra nestled close to her knee where she could stroke the gleaming silk. Eric sprawled on the floor at her feet, his face upturned to hers.

Then she told them a story. It was not like any of Helma's World Stories, but the children liked it. It was all about a gorgeous bird she had at home in her tree-house. She told how she had heard it singing one morning in early spring, high up in the branches of her tree, and how she had watched it day after day flying back and forth in the forest, its yellow breast flashing among the green leaves. It had a long golden bill, and its tail was black as jet; and its wings were the softest gray in the world with a feather of jet in either one. Its song was the clearest, the highest, the purest of all the

bird songs in the forest. It was a wonderful bird, and she wanted it for her own.

Then she told the children how she had set traps for it, and how it had escaped every time. But at last she had made a dear little cage, all woven of spring flowers and leaves, and put food in it. Still the bird escaped, pulling the food out with its long bill and never getting inside the door. And finally she told them how she did capture that wild, shy bird by learning its song and singing it sitting in her tree-house with the window open, until the bird heard and came flying in wonder to find what other bird was calling it. Then she had closed the window and the bird was hers. It hung now in the pretty cage in her prettiest room, and sometimes sang in the middle of the night.

Eric liked the story, and all the better because it was a true story. And the Beautiful Wicked Witch said he could see the bird himself if he would come to her house. He could stroke its bright breast, and it would sing perhaps. Then there were other things caged in her house, cunning little animals, and some big ones, worth any boy's seeing.

But Ivra answered for Eric, shaking her head hard. "No, no. Mother doesn't want us to visit you."

But Eric said, "May I open the cage door and the window and see the bird flash away? I should like that."

"No. Well, perhaps," said the Beautiful Wicked Witch. "Will you come then?"

"I can't, I suppose, if Mother Helma doesn't want me to. Are you sure she doesn't, Ivra?"

Ivra was sure.

The Beautiful Wicked Witch laughed then. "Of course, if you *tell* her she won't let you come. But if you came without telling, how could she mind?"

"That sounds true,—but someway it can't be," said Ivra. And that seemed to end it.

But after a little the Beautiful Wicked Witch began another story. This one was about a frock she had made, a wonderful thing all of cobwebs and violet petals, with tiniest rosebuds around the neck. If Ivra were to slip that frock over her head, and unbraid her funny little pigtails, she would look as pretty as any fairy in the world.

Ivra was not too young to want to be pretty. If she would only go to the Beautiful Wicked Witch's house, she could try on that dress, and wear it for one whole day if she liked. Ivra clasped her hands. But then she thought, and asked a question. "Could I play in it, and run and climb? Would I be as free as in this little old brown smock?"

The Beautiful Wicked Witch raised her hands in horror. "My cobweb frock! Why, it would be ruined! It would be in shreds! How can you even think of treating it so!"

So Ivra shook her head until her funny little pigtails flopped from side to side. "I don't want to wear it then for even a minute. What fun would there be?"

"Well, think about it anyway," said the Beautiful Wicked Witch, and rose to go away. "It's the fir, you know, beyond the white birch."

"Thank you for the stories," said the children.

"Good-by," said the Beautiful Wicked Witch. "Perhaps Eric will remember and come. It's a gorgeous bird, and I haven't said he couldn't free it."

Then she slipped out into the snow flakes, turning to give them one dancing look over her shoulder before the door swung to.

Up flamed the candles, clear high flames when she was gone,

and the fire crackled again, and took on new life, reaching higher and higher.

They got their supper together rather silently. But just before going to sleep Ivra roused herself to say, "Let's promise each other we won't go to the Beautiful Wicked Witch's fir until mother comes home,—and we can tell her how jolly the Witch is, and what good stories she told us."

"I don't want to go anyway," answered Eric, "unless I can free the bird."—But you see, he had not promised.

After a while, "Did you notice how pale her face was when she wasn't laughing?" asked Eric.

"Yes, and not so beautiful then. Mother may come in the night, and we never know it till morning!"

Soon they were asleep, a tired, but happy little girl and boy.

I think the Tree Mother sank down in her air-boat to look in at them and open the door wide, which they had forgotten, so they would have fresh air all night; but it was dark, and the room was shadowy, so perhaps it was only the wind.

CHAPTER IX

THE WIND HUNT

AFTER all, Mother Helma was not there the next morning,—nor the next, nor the next. She did not come back for days and days and days. Much happened before she returned, and much happened after. I will tell you.

During the days the children roamed the forest looking for their mother. They asked every one they could find whether he had seen her. The Tree Man, his daughter, the Bird Fairies, and the Forest Children, not one of them had seen or heard of her since she went away. But they all said with one accord that she would surely come back in her own time. It was not wise to go seeking her so. She loved them. She would return.

"Wait and be patient," they said. "Time will bring Helma."

But they were Forest People, who live long, long lives, and see far. Eric was an Earth Child, and Ivra was not all a Forest Child. So they found it hard to be wise and wait and do nothing but trust Helma and know she would return.

So they went wandering all the day. They did not go home for meals, even, after a while, but ate with the Tree Man and his daughter or the Forest Children. Sometimes as they walked through the forest, looking all about, even up into the trees for their mother, they would suddenly burst into play. "Tag," Ivra would cry, tapping Eric on the shoulder, and

away she would fly, he after her, in a race that grew merrier and merrier as it ran on. Ivra darted and twisted away when Eric thought he had her, rolling down little hills on the snow crust, climbing trees, jumping brooks until he was lucky enough to catch her by one of her pigtails at last, or snatch her flying skirt. "Tag!" Then away he sped, and the game would go on for a happy while.

But sooner or later they always stopped running, stopped laughing, and remembered why they were wandering the wood alone. Then they would call for Helma. Ivra's voice was shrill and sweet, and rang through the bare woods like a bird-song. Eric's wavered a little uncertainly, as though he doubted whether Helma knew it well enough to answer. "Helma, Helma, Helma! Ohh Helma! Helmaa-a!"

No Helma answered. Sometimes a Forest Child came running to say, "We haven't seen her yet, Ivra. But we are watching." The Bird Fairies fluttered at the call and nodded their little heads uneasily. Children's voices calling for their mother was a sad sound, and made the kindly little creatures restless. One or two of them would fly to nestle in Ivra's neck and whisper, "Give her time. Do not hurry her so. She will come back."

But the children were losing faith. They went calling, seeking and playing through the woods all the hours of daylight. At night Ivra told Eric World Stories, World Story after World Story until sleep made them forget.

The fifth morning of their search dawned blue and clear and windy.

"The Wind Creatures will be happy to-day," said Ivra when she opened her eyes and heard the wind pushing at all the windows of the house and saw the blue morning sky. "Wild Star will be circling the world."

"Why, then he will see Helma somewhere!" cried Eric.

Ivra sprang from her bed. "Eric, how splendid! We must go with him! Why didn't I think of it at the very first!"

They did not stop for breakfast, but were into their coats and ready for the day's search in a twinkling. Neither of them had bothered to undress the night before. Ivra's hair had gone unbrushed for two days. Things like that are apt to slip when one's mother is away. So her little pigtails were no longer smooth and glossy, but frowsy and loose, and the rest of her hair was ruffled until it looked something like the Bird Fairies' soft plumage. Eric's head, too, was shaggier than ever, and a smudge from firebuilding had darkened one of his cheeks since the morning before. They had not bathed in the "bird bath" since Helma had gone away. They never seemed to have time, or else they were too sleepy.

Now they no more thought of baths than they thought of breakfast. Eric followed Ivra, who knew all the ways in the forest, to the spot where Wild Star was most likely to be, if he was to be found at all on such a windy, perfect day. They ran earnestly, never slackening to skip or play. And soon they came in sight of some giant cedar trees near the edge of the forest. There were several Wind Creatures standing there, laughing in shrill, glad voices, pointing with their arms, and flapping their purple wings. Wind Creatures are growing-up boys and girls with fairy-hearts and strong, never-tiring purple wings, remember. Wild Star was among them.

But before the children had come up to them, the Wind Creatures suddenly joined hands,—as they do just before flying,—and started running down the sloping hill that ended the forest.

For a minute Ivra was in despair. "Now they are gone for the day to circle the world, and I shall never find mother,"

she thought. But she did not waste any more breath running. She stopped short and lifted her voice, clear and insistent, "Wild Star! Wild Star! I need you! Don't run away. Wild Star!"

The Wind Creatures had reached the foot of the hill, running swiftly hand in hand, and their wings were already lifted for flying. But Wild Star, at the sound of Ivra's voice, leaned back suddenly on the hands he was holding, almost throwing his comrades on their faces, and breaking the line. He turned right about, swinging the others with him, and came leaping and running back.

"What is the matter, little comrade?" he asked. "What is the matter?"

"In all your flying 'round the world, Wild Star, you must have seen my mother Helma. She is lost. Oh, can't you tell us where she is?"

"Yes, of course. But I didn't know she was lost. I thought she was visiting Earth-friends."

"Truly, truly?" Ivra's eyes shone with joy, and Eric grabbed his cap from his head and threw it up in the air shouting, "Hurrah!"

"Oh, will you bring her to us right away?" Ivra begged.

Wild Star looked doubtful. "Perhaps she wouldn't want to come."

Ivra laughed merrily at that. "Then take us to her," she said, "and you will see how she wants to come when *we* ask her."

"Give us your hands, then!"

They held out their hands. Ivra's was grasped by Wild Star's and Eric's by another Wind Creature. With their free hands they clasped each other's. So the four started running

down the hill, while the rest of the Wind Creatures flew off over their heads.

Wild Star and his comrade ran faster and faster, until Eric wondered how it was that he and Ivra were ever keeping up with them. Soon he realized that his feet were scarcely touching the ground. At the foot of the hill stood a little group of birches, and they were running right upon it. He did not see how they could either turn out or stop themselves at that speed. Almost as soon as he had seen the birches, though, they were beyond them. They had not turned out, they had jumped right over the birches, and they were much higher than Eric's head! They were running so swiftly now that only their toes ever touched the ground,—if *they* did.

What fun it was to run like that, the wind at their backs, and the Wind Creatures drawing them strongly forward faster and faster and faster until they were really flying just above the snow.

Across white fields they skimmed,—over fences and frozen streams, bushes and banks, through orchards and meadows, on, on, on, until they came to the town.

There Ivra pulled back for a minute, and the Wind Creatures slowed down. Eric knew why Ivra was afraid of the town. She had told him all about it while they played in the wood. Helma, her mother, was a human, but she hated the town and loved the fairies and their ways. That was why she had run away to live by herself in the wood. But Ivra was neither fairy nor human; she was both.

Now the fairies are afraid of humans because humans look right through them and do not see them. That upsets the fairies and makes them uncomfortable. Of course Helma and Eric were exceptions, for because they had no shadows in their eyes they could see them and play with them. So the

fairies accepted those two as one of themselves. Ivra was different. Because she was only half fairy, any human could see her whether his eyes were shadowed or not if he would only look hard enough. The dreadful part was that when a human did see her, he was likely not to believe in her. He would just think he was day-dreaming, and that the little girl with the soft eyes, the ash-colored pigtails, and the quick feet was just a piece of his day-dream. Not to be seen is bad enough. But it is much worse to be seen and not believed in. That was why Ivra was afraid of the town. People saw her there and either rubbed their eyes and looked another way, or laughed.

But now she was going for her mother, and she could bear anything, even that. She did not hold back long. They ran past the canning factory, and Eric did not give a glance to it. A little girl looking out over a pile of cans saw him, however, and wondered at his warm suit of brown cloth, his leggins, sandals and the cap with wings. She remembered him in rags. She saw Ivra too, and did not rub her eyes and think her a dream. But she did not call to any one in the factory or point, for she knew *they* would think it a dream.

Through the crooked narrow streets, past the crooked narrow houses,—one of them Mrs. Freg's,—they sped faster than the wind! On, on, on,—up the wide avenue through the "residential section" where big houses eyed them from proud terraces,—out into the country again they raced.

There they came to a high gray stone wall, blocking their way, and stood still.

"You must climb," said Wild Star. "She is in there."

CHAPTER X

ON THE GRAY WALL

IT was a very high wall that hid their mother, and at first glance it seemed impossible that they could ever climb it. But Ivra did not stop to wonder. She ran up and down, hunting for a foothold. At last she reached the end of the wall and disappeared around the corner. Eric and the Wind Creatures followed. When they came up to her she had already found a place where the stones were laid a bit unevenly, one on the other, and was half way to the top, clinging with toes and fingers.

"Bravo!" cried the Wind Creatures. Eric went up after her, often slipping back and bruising and scratching his hands and knees, but as resolute as his playmate. At last they gained the top. The Wind Creatures had flown up and were waiting for them there, sitting cross-legged with their purple wings folded down their backs.

The wall enclosed the garden of a very rich family. It was a formal garden with straight walks, trellises, fountains, benches and neat flower beds laid out in squares and circles, now piled high with blossoming snow.

Just as the children reached the top of the wall, the door into the garden from the stern gray mansion behind it opened and through it came three people. First was a very tall lady all wrapped up in furs,—tails and heads of the poor animals that had been slain to make them hanging from her shoulders and down her back. Even the children could see that

her face was sour in spite of all its smiling. Then came a young man in a stiff, funny hat, carrying a cane, beating up the snow flowers with it as he passed the flower beds. And behind them walked—Helma, with her gaze on the ground. That is why they did not know her at first, that and her very strange clothes. She was dressed all in velvet and fur, and her arms up to her elbows were hidden in a huge white muff. She swayed as she walked on weird little high heels and the toes of her boots drew out to long points, almost like a goblin's. Her hat was a velvet affair, so awkward and heavy it seemed to weigh down her head, and her candleflame hair was smothered under it. Is it any wonder that they did not know her like that!

But when she walked close under the wall and they heard her voice they knew her, and the Wind Creatures had to hold Ivra from jumping down and throwing herself into her arms. "Wait," they whispered.

From their high place on the wall they could look down on the heads of the three people, and hear all they were saying. They had never learned that it is not fair to listen that way.

From all Helma said they could plainly see she was a prisoner. She was pleading with the old woman. She was saying, "No, never, never, never, in a thousand days and years will I ever be happy here. My place is in the forest. Oh, how these heels bother!"

"Silly girl!" cried the old woman, smiling more than ever, and looking more disagreeable than ever at the same time. "Your place is where you were born—in a fine house and wearing clothes like other people. Heels indeed! Did you expect them to do any thing else but bother? Mine have bothered for sixty years, but you haven't heard *me* complain."

"Neither would I," Helma said, "if I didn't know about other kinds of shoes that don't hurt. Those sandals I wore when you caught me didn't hurt. Why can't I wear those, at least when I walk in the garden?"

"Well, you might," began the old woman, a little more kindly, and smiling less, "if you promise always to put on the high heels before coming into the drawing room——"

"No," said the young man sharply. "Let her once into the garden in her sandals and she'll climb the wall and be off. I say that we give her no chance to escape. After she has been to a hundred or so balls and worn these beautiful and appropriate clothes long enough she'll be glad of her luck, and nothing could drag her into the forest. Believe me!"

Now Helma stopped pleading, and laughed at the young man. "Do you think high heels, or even a hat that weighs down my head like this horrid one can keep me much longer from my little daughter, and that dear new little boy? What they are doing without me all this time—I wonder!" She stopped laughing to sigh.

The old woman took her hand not unkindly. "My poor, dear girl," she said, "how many times must I tell you it is only a dream, that house in the woods and the little girl and boy? They aren't really there at all, you know. You have dreamed them. Come, cheer up. Be a brave girl. We have parties and good times enough here, if you will only get into the spirit of them, to make up for all your forest foolishness."

Helma answered in a low even voice, that showed well enough how sure she was of the truth of what she was saying—"No, they are realer than you. Ivra is realer than all the people in that mansion put together, cousins, uncles, aunts, guests, servants and all. She is my little fairy daughter."

"No," said the young man.

The wings of the Wind Creatures on the top of the wall rustled just then in a gust of cold north wind. Helma threw up her head as at a familiar sound, and her eyes slowly lifted to the faces of the children looking down. For a minute she looked steadily at them without believing, and then it was as though her pale face suddenly burst into song. But the old woman and the young man were not looking at her and so they noticed nothing. The young man said, "The neighbors have talked about us enough already for all your queer ideas and doings. So you'll wear no sandals, no, nor sleep with your skylight open, as you're always asking, nor go one step outside the wall until you have come to your senses and are more like other people. So there!"

But Helma laughed, her head thrown back, so that the children could look into her happy eyes and see the glow of her short hair under her grotesque hat.

"Keep your keys, cousin," she said, "and your old skylight keep shut tight as tight. I shall find a way out. But my children must be patient, and Ivra must teach Eric to keep his face and body clean. They must not forget meal-times, and when anything goes wrong, or they think it is going wrong, they must ask the Tree Man's advice. I will find a way to them soon. They must keep happy and wait."

She said all that slowly and distinctly, her eyes smiling into theirs.

"What silly talk," laughed the sour old lady. "Just as though you were making a speech. Well, it must be luncheon time now, and high time we were changing our frocks. Wear your gray velvet, Helma, and don't forget to put on stockings to match. There's to be strawberry ice to-day,—and goose to begin with of course. Cook says she has never seen a tenderer——"

The old lady went on talking about the wonderful luncheon they were to have until they were out of hearing. But the children on the gray wall could see that Helma was going in differently from the way she had come out. Her head was high, and she stepped out in her funny high heeled boots as though she were walking in sandals. At the little door into the mansion she turned and waved her queer great muff to the children and the Wind Creatures, and they heard her laugh.

But when she was gone, and the door was shut and locked—they heard the great key scrape—Eric turned joyfully to Ivra. She was staring intently at the closed door, her face very pale. Suddenly she buried her head in her arms and burst into sobs, hoarse, jerky sobs, the first and the last time Eric was ever to hear her cry. Eric and the Wind Children sat cross-legged and waited. Soon she stopped and wiped her face on her sleeve.

"She is locked in, but she *will* find a way home," she said, almost laughing. "How glad and how surprised she was to see us! It was almost as though she had begun to believe all their talk about dreams, until she heard the Wind Creatures' wings!"

The Wind Creatures took them back to the forest. Under the giant cedars they said good-by and left them. The children went straight to the Tree Man's to tell him the news. He gave them deep bowls of warm milk to drink, and took off their sandals so that their toes might spread and warm in front of the fire.

Then the Tree Girl begged for a story, and Ivra told a World Story about the rivers,—how they go in search of their mother, the ocean, day and night, around mountains and through mountains, and across whole continents, and never

stop until they find her,—and of the myriad presents they carry to her,—of the things they see and the things they do, as they flow searching.

It was a long story. And almost before the end the little story teller had fallen asleep with her head tipped back against the Tree Man's chest.

They spent that night in the tree, and that was good, for a storm had risen outside, and it was bitter cold in the forest.

CHAPTER XI

THE BEAUTIFUL WICKED WITCH

THE next morning before Eric woke Ivra slipped away to play with the Forest Children.

"On such wild days as this they usually play indoors, for they're little things and the Snow Witches love to tease them," said the Tree Man.

"Perhaps she'll be telling them World Stories," thought Eric, and so he decided to go to the little moss village, too, for though Ivra had told him dozens of World Stories by now, he always wanted to hear more. So after breakfast with the Tree Man and his pretty, shy daughter, he ran out in search of Ivra.

It was indeed a cold morning, blustering and raw. Eric felt chilled almost as soon as he was out of doors. Very soon he lost his way, for he had not been in the forest long enough to grow familiar with landmarks. Just when he was beginning to be a bit hopeless and pinched with the cold he came to the big fir where the Beautiful Wicked Witch lived. It stood green and comforting among all the bare trees of winter.

Eric stopped to look, for now he remembered the Beautiful Wicked Witch and the bird she had caged in there. He saw a door in the tree trunk ajar, and swinging to and fro with tiny tinkling music. He peeped in, and between the swingings caught glimpses of little blue and yellow flowers arranged

in tight bunches in hanging vases. He could smell their sweetness even out there in the cold air.

Then high up in the tree trunk a window opened, and he heard the bird singing. The Beautiful Wicked Witch's face appeared at the window, looking down at him. Her black eyes were sparkling and she nodded good-morning to him as though he were a prince, or at least a grown-up. He could not help nodding back. He liked her very much, she was so beautiful and so friendly.

"Come in and get warm," she called, "and I'll show you my pretty bird."

Eric remembered Ivra's warnings, but he wanted to go in so much that he found himself doing it. The door tinkled louder music when he touched it, and he pushed his way through, as a bee pushes his way into a flower.

The Witch came running twinklingly down a spiral stairway. She kissed his mouth, took off his winged cap and coat, threw them somewhere out of sight, and then he had time to look at her well.

Her gown was green satin, the color of the fir boughs, and her little sandals were green satin, too. A green fir frond bound her forehead; and her black hair hung loose, soft and electric to her waist. Eric had never seen a prettier person in the world, nor one more kind.

She took his two hands and began to whirl in a happy dance. Eric danced, too, for joy and good comradeship. Round and round the room they whirled until their breath was spent.

Then the Beautiful Wicked Witch took him up the spiral staircase to show him the bird. Up and up they went, until they came to a little room high in the tree. The floor was carpeted with yellow satin, and yellow curtains hung at the

window. Deep blue mirrors lined the walls, and they reflected Eric and the Beautiful Wicked Witch dozens of times over.

The pretty bird cage, all made of flowers and leaves, hung in the very middle of the room. Eric stood by it a long time. He put his fingers through the bars, and stroked the bird's soft feathers. But the gorgeous bird paid no attention to him, and did not sing.

"Why doesn't it hop about?" he asked the Beautiful Wicked Witch.

The Witch frowned and pouted. "It ought to, I'm sure. I like to see it hopping. But it would rather sulk. It thinks all the time about the forest, and its mate who is out there somewhere. Sometimes it sings, though. Its voice is wonderful."

"Oh, let's open the cage and free him," cried Eric.

But the Beautiful Wicked Witch seized his hand. "No, no, *no!* It is *mine*. I have caged it in my pretty cage. And it fits into the room, don't you think?"

"I don't know what you mean," said Eric.

"Why, you fit into it, too," said the Witch, looking hard at him. "Your yellow hair and blue eyes match the yellow and blue flowers. Would you like me to make a pretty cage for you and put you into it?"

"No, no!" Eric was suddenly afraid of the Beautiful Wicked Witch.

But she laughed at his fear, and danced a little dance, humming to herself, around the room. Then Eric noticed other cages. The walls were lined with them. Some hung from the ceiling, and some stood in corners. In every cage was a bird or animal. The one standing nearest to him held a pretty gray squirrel, running 'round and 'round on a wheel. He stopped every now and then to peer out through the bars

with quick, bright eyes. In the cage next was a tiny brown field mouse. But he had given up running and playing long ago, and was huddled in the farthest and darkest corner of his cage, his little beady eyes open and watchful.

Eric walked around the room, looking at all the poor little animals and birds. One and all peered through their bars with watchful and fearful eyes. Eric remembered himself in the canning factory and pitied them more than he could ever have done had he not once been a caged little creature too. How he longed to open their doors and the window, and see them scamper and fly away!

But the Witch had stopped her dancing by the bird cage in the middle of the room, and her little hands were between the bars stroking the bright bird-breast. She was saying, "Sing for us, bird. Sing your nicest song for us. Little Eric wants to hear it."

The bird began to beat its wings and breast against the bars. Again and again its bright breast struck the door. But it did not fly open.

"It does not want to sing," laughed the Beautiful Wicked Witch; "but it must. Sing, bird, sing! It does you no good to struggle. You can't get away. Sing, sing!"

Then the bird sang. Its song was truly wonderful, high and clear, as Eric had heard it from outside. But now that he could see the bird caged he did not like the song so well. It was all too sad.

Eric wanted to go away then, out of the tree, and never, never see the Witch again. He would find Ivra and the Forest Children and forget all about these cages. So he said good-by to the Witch and ran down the spiral staircase. But he could not find the door out. He went round and round the wall, but there was no sign of a door. It was indeed as

though a flower had let him in and then closed its petals tight.

The little posies swung in their cases, the bird sang up stairs, and the Beautiful Wicked Witch played and danced, and laughed at all his searching. She would do nothing to help him find the door.

All that day he wandered up stairs and down stairs, or stood at the window looking down through the green fir branches to the free forest-floor. Once the Witch offered to tell him stories. But he wanted no stories of caged things, and those were all the stories she knew. The Witch did not mind his short answers and dark face. She seemed perfectly able to have a good time with herself, and needed no comrades.

At last night fell. The rooms blossomed with candlelight. In the yellow room up stairs the Beautiful Wicked Witch paraded back and forth before the mirrors, loving her own reflection, smiling at herself, courtesying, frowning, looking back over her shoulder,—lifting her hair to let it fall again in electric waves. Eric stood by the window, thoroughly weary of his search and loneliness, and watched her. The bird sat in the cage and watched her. All the little bright eyes of animals watched her. The candles burned steadily.

How Eric longed for Ivra now, and their own big friendly room. He imagined Ivra in the room there all alone getting her supper over the fire, bathing in the fountain bath, opening the windows, and at last falling softly to sleep before the firelight faded.

Oh, if there were only a window open here! How hot it was, and how over-sweetly scented! The Beautiful Wicked Witch went on posing and preening before the mirrors, and seemed to have forgotten all about her new little prisoner.

So he pulled back the yellow satin curtain, and looked out. It was clear, cold starlight. He pressed his face against the window pane and stared down into the shadows beneath the fir. And there, standing erect in the shadow, her face lifted like a pale little moon, stood Ivra.

She saw him, but did not wave. She only nodded, as though she knew now what she had come to make sure of. She stood still for a few minutes, until Eric almost thought she was frozen in the cold. But at last she moved and disappeared under the fir.

Music tinkled through the house. The Beautiful Wicked Witch poised on her toes, surprisedly looking into the reflection of her own eyes.

"Some one has come in, for that was the door," she said. "It opens inward with music."

Eric's heart stood still. Had Ivra come into the Witch's house, Ivra who was so afraid of the Witch? He ran down the stairs and the Witch followed him. Yes, Ivra stood there in the middle of the warm, flower-hung room, like a little cold star beam.

But she did not look at the quaint flowers in their golden vases. And when the Witch ran to her and kissed her she did not even look at her. She looked only at Eric, and her eyes said, "I have come to free you."

"Oh, so you did want to try on the pretty frock after all," cried the Witch, and drew her up the stairs. Eric followed to the yellow room. "No," said Ivra. But the Witch brought it out and tried to slip it over her head. It was sheerest gossamer web, and shimmered like moonlight. And the little rosebuds seemed to make it belong to Ivra.

Eric forgot all about being a prisoner, and forgot the little

caged creatures around the wall. He was delighted with the frock being pushed down on Ivra's shoulders. "How beautiful you'll be!" he cried. But Ivra wriggled away from it and stood clear. Her rudely made brown frock and worn sandals looked odd in that satin room. "I didn't come to see the frock," she said, shaking her head till her pigtails bobbed. "I came to get Eric."

The Beautiful Wicked Witch laughed. "Get him if you can," she said. Then she turned her back on the children and began to braid her black hair among the mirrors.

They went to the window and waited there, watching her.

"The door doesn't open out,—only in, I think," Eric whispered. "So we can't get out."

"Mother has told me how it would be," Ivra whispered back. "We'll have to wait until she's asleep and then find a way."

Then Ivra sat down on the floor and began to rock back and forth and sing a lullaby. It was a lullaby her mother had sung to her all her babyhood. Ivra sang in a very little voice, almost a murmur only, but by listening Eric and the Beautiful Wicked Witch could catch the words. She sang the same words over and over and over.

Night is in the forest,
  Tree Mother is nigh.
By-abye, by-abye-bye.

Sleep is in the forest—
  His feathers brush your eye.
By-abye, by-abye-bye.

Mother's arms are holding you,
  Forest dreams are folding you.
By-abye, by-abye—bye.

The Beautiful Wicked Witch sat down before the mirrors after a while, still watching her reflection, but listening to the song, too. Her head gradually sank lower and lower, first resting chin in hand and at last right down on her arm stretched along the floor. Her face lay turned towards the children, and they saw the mirth slowly fade in her great black eyes, the lids drop lower and lower,—and then she was asleep suddenly. Now she looked almost as young as themselves, and like a pale child who has fallen to sleep at its play.

But the children did not stop to look at her. Once they were sure she was asleep they were off searching for the door. Up and down the stairs and all around the rooms they ran on tiptoes. But it was no use, and at last they came back to the window.

"We must jump," whispered Ivra.

Eric looked down, and wondered. It was a long way to the ground!

"The snow is soft beneath the crust," Ivra said. "It will only cut us a little."

"Let's take the bird," Eric said. Ivra ran to it, and opened the cage door. It hopped onto her finger eagerly, and she held its bill so that it would not sing.

Eric opened the window. "I'll jump first," he whispered.

But Ivra said, "Oh, let's hold hands and jump together."

The Beautiful Wicked Witch felt the cold night air from the window on her face, and stirred in her sleep. Her eyelids quivered. So the children did not wait a minute more. They climbed up onto the window sill, Ivra still holding the bird. "One, two, three," she whispered, and they jumped.

Out and down they went like two shooting stars and plunked through the snowcrust. They were up in a second.

Their wrists and elbows were a little bruised and cut, but they were not really hurt at all. But strange and strange, the bird had fluttered near Ivra's hand for that second, and then flew straight back up and into the open window. It had been caged so long it did not really want its freedom after all. Eric cried out with regret.

But Ivra seized his hand, and they ran home together through the cold, starlit forest. Before they leapt the hedge into their own garden Eric saw the firelight blossoming in the windows. But he stood still outside the door, after Ivra had gone in, for a time, breathing the cold air and the clear silence right down into his toes.

CHAPTER XII

IVRA'S BIRTHDAY

"TO-MORROW is the shortest day in the year," Ivra told Eric one night after they were in bed. He did not answer, for he was very sleepy. But after a minute she spoke again. "It's my birthday too!"

Then he opened his eyes and sat up, for her voice sounded very queer and far away. He saw that she too was sitting up, her hands folded under her chin. "Mother always had a party for me," she said. "Such fun!"

"Perhaps one will happen to-morrow even with her away," Eric comforted. "Oh, goody! I do hope so!"

"Perhaps. Anyway I'm going to pretend there's a party waiting for me to-morrow. You pretend too, Eric, and then even if it doesn't come true we will have had the pretending at least."

Eric agreed to pretend. It was one of his favorite games. And very soon the two children nestled down under their covers and drifted into sleep and dreams of a party.

They were roused early in the morning by something tapping lightly on the doors and windows. Eric was out of bed first, and saw the Wind Creatures, half a dozen or more of them, looking in and beckoning. Their purple wings gleamed gold in the early morning sun. Wild Star was standing in the open door.

"Happy birthday!" he cried and tossed a snow ball into

Ivra's bed. She popped to her knees, laughing and rosy with sleep. But then she was grave in a minute. "There's to be no party, Wild Star," she said. "Mother's not back yet. Are you all here for that?"

"Yes, we're here for that, and there *is* to be a party, an all day one too. Your Forest Friends have seen to that."

The children were radiant with joy. And Ivra whispered to Eric, "We had our pretending, too!"

The Wind Creatures would not come in to breakfast, for of course they do not like in-doors at all, and besides, they need very little food. So they played in the garden while the children dressed and ate. Very soon the children were done, though, and came leaping out ready for a day's joy.

The Wind Creatures led them then out through the forest. The Tree Girl was watching for them at her door. It was plain to be seen, when she joined them, that she carried something in her arms very secretly under her white cloak. But no one mentioned it. Ivra knew it must be a surprise for her birthday. Where the party was to be no one told her, and she did not ask. She liked surprises.

They came to the Forest Children's little moss village. The youngest Forest Child of all was the only one up so early. He was busily breaking dead twigs from bushes to build his morning fire and making up a little rhymeless song about Ivra's birthday as he worked.

This is her birthday,
Spring's little daughter—
Spring's little daughter—
This is her birthday.

Wake now, wake now,
All you Forest Children,
Wake for her birthday
And tie your sandals on.

When he saw them he cried, "Hurrah! Happy birthday, Ivra!"

At his cry all the little windows in the little moss houses opened and there were the tousled heads of the Forest Children, their eyes blinking sleepily against the gilded morning light.

"Thank you, thank you," Ivra cried back to the youngest Forest Child. "Hurry and follow."

Before they had gone on their way five minutes more the Forest Children were up with them, tugging at buckles and sandal strings as they ran, begging not to be left behind.

Soon they came to Big Pine Hill, a hill deep in the forest with no trees but a giant pine at the top. The Wind Creatures had built a slide there by brushing away the snow and leaving a broad track of shining blue ice. Up under the pine were sleds enough for every one, made all of woven hemlock branches. They needed no runners for the ice was so slippery and the hill so steep *anything* would go down it fast enough. Ivra's Forest Friends must have worked all the day before to make those sleds—and now her shining face and clasped hands were reward enough.

She was the first to try the hill. She threw herself on her sled and down she flashed. At the bottom she tumbled off, and still on her knees shouted up to Eric and the others at the top, "Oh, it's splendid! Come on!"

Then the hill was covered with speeding sleds. The Bird Fairies had none of their own, for they were so little they

might have come to harm on that hill. But they had just as good a time for all of that, catching rides with the others, clinging to shoulders or heads or feet as it happened.

Every one was there, even the Snow Witches who had not been invited. They came whirling and dancing through the forest almost as soon as the sliding had begun. Ivra gave them glad welcome in spite of their rough ways and stinging hair. For she, the only one of all who were there, liked them very well and had made them her comrades often and often on windy winter days. And they, who cared for nobody, cared for her. "She is not like anybody," they explained it to each other. "*She is a great little girl.*"

But they would not take Ivra's sled as she wanted them to. They had not come to spoil her fun. Instead they raced down the hill behind her or before her, pushing and pulling, their stinging hair in her face. But that only made her cheeks very red, and she did not mind them at all. Then she tried sliding down on her feet, with the long line of witches pushing from behind, their hands on each other's shoulders. That was the best fun of all, and almost always ended in a tumble before the bottom was reached. Though the others avoided the witches as much as they could they admired Ivra for such hardy comrading.

Before noon every one was very hungry. Then the littlest Forest Child said, "Follow me. The Tree Girl has gone ahead."

It was true, she had slipped away when no one noticed.

The littlest Forest Child led them away to a little valley-place where hemlock boughs had been spread to make a floor and raised on three sides to make a shelter. When they had come close enough for Ivra to see what it was perched so big

and white in the middle of the hemlock floor she stopped and sighed with joy while she clasped her hands.

It was a beautiful frosted birthday cake with nine brave candles of all colors and burning steadily, just the kind of cake her mother had always baked for her birthdays.—Only last year there had been eight candles. She had not hoped for this final delight. She ran quickly forward and was the first to kneel down by it. The Tree Girl was there waiting, and now Ivra knew it was the cake that she had been carrying so secretly under her cloak.

The Snow Witches did not follow into that shelter. They have a great fear of shelters, you must know, for when forced into them they quickly lose their fierceness, and their fierceness is their greatest pride. But before they left the party one of them came close to Eric, so close that tears were whipped into his eyes and quickly froze on his lashes. "Take this to your little comrade," she said, thrusting a box made of pine cones into his hands. "It's for her to keep her paper dolls in. We witches made it."

Then all the witches went screeching and swirling away through the forest, and Ivra, Eric and the others settled down to the business of eating the birthday cake.

But first the Tree Girl, who is very sensible, insisted that they eat some nuts and apples. Indeed, she would allow no one a bite of the wonderful cake until he had eaten at least one apple and twenty nuts.

Before Ivra cut the cake the others blew out the candles, one after another, and made her a wish in turn for every candle. The Tree Girl wished her a bright new year, the Bird Fairies that her mother would soon return, the Wind Creatures that she would keep her gay heart forever, the

Forest Children that she would become the most famous story teller in the Forest World.

And then it was Eric's turn. He had never been to a birthday party before, and never had he made a wish for some one else. So he was a little puzzled. But at last he had an idea and cried, "I wish that your hair will grow golden and curly before to-morrow morning." All princesses Ivra had ever told him about had curly golden hair, and though she had never said it, Eric had suspected for some time that Ivra would like that kind of hair herself. Then he puffed his cheeks and blew out his candle, a fat green one. Ivra laughed.

"The Snow Witches would never let me keep curly hair," she said. "They'd whip it straight in an hour."

That reminded Eric of the pine cone box and he gave it to her and told her about it. She was almost as delighted with that as with the cake.

What a wonderful cake it was! Such food Eric had never dreamed of, and he was a great dreamer! The frosting was over an inch thick.

Then, of course, Ivra must tell them stories. All the Forest People loved her stories. They built a fire to keep from freezing. The Wind Creatures sat a little way off where it was cool enough for their comfort, but not too far to hear Ivra's clear voice. This time she told all she knew about the birthday of this Earth, one of the most magical and splendid and strange of her stories.

But it was the shortest day in the year, Ivra's birthday, and night fell all too soon. Then the Tree Girl, who seldom forgot to be sensible, said they had better go home. The littlest Forest Child was already asleep, curled close by the fire. They roused him gently. Good-nights were called and a few minutes after, the shelter was deserted, and the fire out. And by

starlight could be seen many footprints leading away in the white snow out into all parts of the Forest.

Eric and Ivra walked toward home hand in hand. They had to pass the morning's slide on the way. When they came in sight of it they began to walk more quickly and quietly and to look intently. The blue ice shone bluer than ever in starlight, but more than the ice shone. Shining *people* were using the sleds and the hill was covered with them.

"Why, they must be Star People," Ivra cried excitedly.

When they were quite near they stood to watch.

The strange Star folk were very silent, never calling and laughing as those who had slid there in the morning had done. Two, a little boy and a young girl, came spinning down on the same sled and stopped so near that Ivra and Eric might have touched them by leaning forward. But the Star-two must have thought the Forest-two shadows, for they paid no attention to them at all.

Now that they were so near Eric could see that their hair was blue, like the shadows on snow, and their faces a beautiful shining white. Their straight short garments were blue like shadows, too, and their arms, legs and feet were bare. But they did not seem conscious of the cold. Eric did not hear them speak, but they looked at each other as though they *were* speaking, and then suddenly the little boy laughed merrily, as though the young girl had just told him something very amusing.

Soon the girl turned and ran away up the hill. But the little boy was as quick as she and threw himself on the sled while she never slackened her pace, but drew him straight and fast up the steep slope.

"I have never seen them before," Ivra whispered to Eric. "But mother has told me of them. They don't talk as we do

you see. They don't *have* to. They know each other's thoughts. They almost never leave their Stars. Do you think—perhaps, to-night they saw our slide shining, and wondered so much about it they had to come down? Even mother has never seen them. It was Tree Mother told her."

Eric was very silent, for he had never seen such beautiful people. The little boy had had a face like a star, and great shining eyes. The young girl had been clear like the day, and without smiling her face had been brimmed with happiness.

But now he felt Ivra trembling. She whispered again, "You know, Eric, it is wonderful for us to see them like this. Some day, mother says, we may get to be like them!"

"And speak without words?" Eric asked wondering.

"Yes, and more than that. We may be as *alive* as they. Now we're only Forest people, and not all *that* even—almost dreams. They are *real!*"

Then she took his hand and drew him away. "I cannot look any more," she said; "can you? They are too beautiful!"

Eric put his fingers to his eyes as he walked. "Yes, it's hard to see the ground now. My eyes ache a little."

But how the children wished their mother were waiting for them in the little house to hear the tale!

CHAPTER XIII

NORA'S GRANDCHILDREN

ONE afternoon Eric and Ivra started out for the Forest Children's moss village to play with them. But when they got there they found all the little houses deserted: not a Forest Child was to be found. They must have gone into some other part of the forest to play. So Ivra and Eric wandered on and on, a little lonely, a little tired of just each other for comrades, till at last they came to the very edge of the forest,—and there was Nora's farm, a rambling red brick house, with a barn twice its size behind it. Down in the pasture by the house half a dozen Snow Witches were dancing in a circle, now near, now far, all over the pasture, and sometimes right up to the farm-house windows.

Ivra clapped her hands and bounded forward. Eric did not follow. He stood to watch. When the Snow Witches saw Ivra running to them they rushed to meet her. For a minute she was lost in a cloud of blown snow, and then there she was dancing in their circle back and forth across the pasture, and then away, away, away! But before she frolicked quite out of sight she turned to look for her playfellow, and beckoned to him.

"Come on," she called. "We're going to slide on the brook below the cornfield."

But Eric did not follow. He did not like the Snow Witches. And just as Ivra and the Witches drifted out of sight, he thought he heard the Forest Children laughing. The sound

came from the barn. So Eric ran to the door. It was a big sliding door, and now stood open on a crack just large enough for a child to slip through. Eric went in.

The barn was tremendously big, a great dusty place full of the smell of hay. Ahead of him were two stalls, with a horse in one. But Eric was most interested in the empty stall, for it was from there the laughter seemed to come. He stood looking and listening, and then right down through the ceiling of the stall shot a child, and landed laughing and squealing in the hay in the manger. She sat up, saw Eric and stared. She was a little girl about his own age, freckle-faced, snub-nosed and red-haired. She had the jolliest, the nicest face in the world.

Eric opened his mouth to say, "Hello," but kept it open, silent in amazement, for another child had shot through the ceiling and landed beside the girl. This was a boy. He was red-headed, too, freckle-faced and snub-nosed. He looked even jollier than the girl.

Before Eric had closed his mouth on his amazement, "Whoop!" and down came another boy. This boy was red-haired, freckle-faced and snub-nosed, and he looked jollier than the other two put together, if that were possible, for his red hair curled in saucy, tight little ringlets, and his mouth was wide with smiles.

It was this last one who said, "Hello, who are you?"

'Eric,—who are you?"

"Nora's grandchildren, of course. Come up. We're having sport."

The three children ran across the barn to a ladder and scrambled up and disappeared through a trap door at the top. Eric followed. The attic was full of hay in mountains and little hills,—hay and hay and hay. He followed the chil-

dren around the biggest mountain, through a tunnel—and there they vanished!

He found the hole in the stable ceiling and looked down. Not very far below him was the manger full of hay and red-headed children. "Look out down there! Whoop!" cried Eric, and dropped, landing among them.

Then the four laughed heartily together and ran across the barn again, up the ladder, around the hay mountain and dropped down the hole. They did that dozens of times until they were tired of it.

Then they played hide-and-go-seek in the hay country, and after that Blind Man's Buff in the barn below. The little girl was Blind Man first. They tied a red handkerchief tight over her eyes. Then they ran about, dodging her, calling her, laughing at her groping hands and hesitating steps. But after a few minutes she became accustomed to the darkness and ran and jumped about after them until they had to be very wary and swift indeed. Soon she caught Eric and then he was Blind Man.

By and by they played tag, just plain tag, and Eric liked that best of all. Back and forth across the great room they raced,—up the ladder, over the hay, through the hole into the stable, round and round, in and out, up and down until they were too tired and hot for any more.

Then they lay up in the hay where there was a little window, looking far out across the meadows.

Eric saw Ivra out there in the first field, wandering around alone and now and then looking up at the barn. She must have heard their shouts and laughter. He pointed her out to the other children. "That is my playmate out there," he said. "Let's open the window and call to her to come up. She'll tell us stories."

The children looked out eagerly. "But there's nobody there," they said.

Eric laughed. "No, look!" He pointed with his finger. "Over there by the white birch. Look! She sees us." He waved. "Quick, help me open the window."

He could not find the catch. The window was draped with cobwebs and dusty with the dust of years. It looked as though it had never been opened.

The little red-headed girl put her hand on his arm. She was laughing. "Don't be silly," she said. "There's no one by the white birch. You're imagining."

"Why, look! Of course she's there!" Eric was impatient. "She's moving now, waving to us. Of course you see her!"

"Yes," said the jolliest of the boys. "We do see it—faintly. We've seen it before too,—a kind of a shadow on the snow. But father says it's nothing to mind. Imaginings. Nothing real, just spots in our eyes or something."

Then Eric remembered all that Ivra had told him. She was half fairy. People could see her if they looked hard enough. But they were not apt to believe their own eyes when they had looked. That was dreadful for her. She had not said so, but he had guessed it from her face when she told him. Well, well, now he understood a little better. These were Earth Children, with shadows in their eyes. Ivra could never be their playmate.

But *he* could see her well enough because his eyes were clear. And presently he would run out to her and they would go home together. But just now it was jolly and cozy here in the barn, and these Earth Children were good fun. He hoped she would wait for him, but if she did not he would find his way alone easily enough.

"You don't really believe in it, do you?" the red-headed girl

was asking. "If you do,—better not. Grown-ups will laugh at you."

"Nora, your grandmother, won't laugh," said Eric. "She knows Ivra well enough, and Helma, too."

"Oh, yes," said the jolliest boy. "But she is *queer*. We love her, and she's a fine grandmother, I can tell you. And she tells the best stories. But she's queer just the same, and she can't fool us."

"Let's go in and get some cookies from her," said the other boy. "They must be done by now."

So up they hopped, and without another look towards the shadow out on the snow by the white birch, jumped down the hole, and ran out of the barn into the kitchen.

Nora was there knitting by a table, two big pans of cookies just out of the oven cooling in front of her.

How good they smelled! Eric had never tasted hot ginger cookies before, and when Nora gave him one, a big round one all for his own, he almost danced with delight. He perched on the edge of the table and ate that one and many another before he was done.

"This boy, grandma," began the red-headed girl.

"His name is Eric," interrupted Nora, handing him another cookie. "I know him very well."

"Well, he saw It while we were looking out of the barn window! And he said It was real and his playmate, and he wanted to call It in to tell us stories!"

"Don't say 'It,' " said Nora. "Her name is 'Ivra.' But of course you can't play with her. She isn't an Earth Child. She's a fairy. So don't say anything about it to your father when he comes home to-night. It would make him cross."

"But it doesn't make you cross," laughed the jolliest boy. "And so won't you tell us some stories about it now. You

know,—the little house in the wood, the Tree Man, the Forest Children, Helma, Ivra and all the rest of it."

"Do tell us a story," begged the other two.

So Nora put down her knitting, and taking the cat on her lap, a great sleepy white fellow who had been purring by the stove, she began to tell them stories.

She told stories about Helma and Ivra, the Wind Creatures, the Snow Witches and many more. The children listened eagerly, clapping their hands now and then, and at the end of every story asking for more.

But Eric was lost in wonder. The children thought the stories were not true,—just fairy stories told them by a grandmother. And Nora had evidently long ago given up expecting them to believe. Her black eyes twinkled knowingly when they met Eric's puzzled ones.

And all the time Eric had only to turn his head to see Ivra walking out there around in the field, looking at the farm house, waiting for him. But gradually, as the stories went on the little figure out there grew more and more to look like just a blue shadow on the snow, paler and paler. Finally he had to strain his eyes to see it at all.

Then he jumped down from the table and said he must go home. His heart was beating a little wildly. For he was afraid Ivra might fade away from him altogether. These red-headed children were fine playfellows. He liked them,—oh, so much! He wished he could stay and play with them for—a week. Yes. But he must go now. That blue shadow on the snow seemed lonely.

"Take her some cookies," said Nora, filling his pockets. The children laughed at the top of their voices. "Yes, take some cookies to the fairy. But you can eat them yourself and pretend it is the fairy eating them," they cried.

Nora laughed with them, and so after a minute Eric joined in. But he and Nora looked at each other through their laughter and nodded understanding.

When Ivra saw him at last come out of the farm house door, she didn't wait longer, but ran away into the wood. He overtook her a long way in, walking rapidly.

"Did you have a good time with the witches?" he asked.

"Why didn't you come, too?" she said

"Oh, it was too cold. Nora's grandchildren are awfully good fun. We played hide-and-go-seek, just as we played it at the Tree Man's party."

"Did they laugh at me?"

" . . . . No, they laughed at me. They thought I was a funny boy."

"To have me for a playmate?"

Then Eric began to think that Ivra was not very happy. Perhaps she had been lonely.

"You're always running off with the Snow Witches," he said. "But I won't play with Nora's grandchildren any more unless they'll let you play too. I won't, truly!"

Ivra laughed. And it was like spring coming into winter. "Yes, play with them all you like! I love them, too. I've often watched them. The littlest boy, the one with the funny curls, laughs at me and stares and stares. But the other two . . . they just give me a glance and then forget all about me. They don't think I'm real. But they are awfully jolly. You play with them and when you tell me about it afterwards I'll pretend I was there playing too."

Then the two clasped hands and went skipping home.

CHAPTER XIV

SPRING COMES

ONE morning when Ivra woke up she knew spring had come before her eyes were open. But Eric had to go outdoors to make sure. He was sure enough when he smelled the ground, a good earth smell. Snow still clung to the garden in spots here and there, but the warm sun promised it would not be for long. Something in the sky, something in the air, a smell of earth, and a stirring in his own heart told him it was true. Spring had come!

Ivra had felt and known it before her eyes were open, and now that they were open, those eyes of hers looked like two blue spring flowers just awake. She hopped about in the garden poking and prodding the earth with a stick, looking for her violets, her anemones, her star flowers. Not a green leaf was pushing through yet, but oh, how soon there would be!

Suddenly she stopped and stood still looking away into the forest. Then she ran to Eric on the door stone. She cried, "Mother will come now. Don't you feel it? She will come with the spring!"

Eric did feel it. For there was magic in the day. The magic came to him in the air, in the smell of the earth, in the new warm wind and said, "Everything is yours that you want. Joy is coming." And Mother Helma was what he wanted. So he felt sure she was on the way.

"She must have found the key,—or do you suppose she climbed the gray wall?" wondered Ivra.

"Shall we go to meet her?" asked Eric.

"No, no. We must get the house clean and ready for her. We must hurry."

And then such a house-cleaning was begun as you or I have never seen. The Forest Children had been up at dawn to greet the spring, and now they came running to tell Ivra and Eric about it. When they heard that Helma was at last coming back and the house was to be cleaned they wanted to help. First it was decided to wash the floor. Pail after pail of water from the fountain they splashed on it. Streamlets of water flowed into the fireplace and out over the door stone. Out and in ran the Forest Children trying to help, and with every step making foot prints on the wet floor, muddy little foot prints, dozens of them and finally hundreds of them.

Then the windows were washed. And because the Forest Children could not run on those they were made bright and clear. But soon the Forest Children pressed their faces against the panes to watch for Helma, and as the minutes passed breath-clouds formed there, spreading and deepening until the glass sparkled no more. But no one noticed. No one cared. For now they were shining up the dishes, polishing them with cloths, and setting them in neat rows in the cupboard.

Then Wild Star appeared, his hands full of spring flowers that he had found deep in the forest in the sunniest and most protected place, the very first spring flowers. "Helma must have gotten past that wall, now it's spring," he said; "and here are some flowers to greet her. See, I left the roots on, the way she likes them. Let's plant them by the door stone."

They dug up the earth with their hands, Forest Children's hands, Wild Star's hands, Eric's and Ivra's,—and planted

the flowers all about the door stone. Then Wild Star flew away a little languidly.

Ivra looked after him. "He'll soon find the deepest, darkest, coolest place," she said, "make himself a nest of smooth leaves and dream away the summer. Fall and winter are his flying times. We shall see him at no more parties for a while."

"And the Snow Witches? What will become of them?" asked Eric.

"They will get into hollows of old trees and under rocks, draw in their skirts and their hair, curl up and sleep."

"Good news!" thought Eric. But he did not say it for he knew Ivra liked the Snow Witches almost best of all to play with and would miss them.

Now the Tree Girl came through the gap in the hedge. She was wearing a green frock, green sandals, and pussy willow buds made a wreath in her hair.

"Spring, spring!" she cried as she came up the path. "We heard the sap running in our tree all night. Father has gone on a spring wandering, and I shall stay within tree no longer for a while."

"We know, we know!" crowed Ivra. "*I* knew before my eyes were open this morning. Eric had to smell the ground first. Imagine! We have been cleaning house. Mother will surely come now. Don't *you* feel it?"

The Tree Girl lifted her face up in the new warm wind. Her soft hair floated feather-like. "Yes, I feel it. She is on the way. Spring brings everything."

A bird flashed from the trees. It lighted on the hedge for a second and was away again. But Eric had had time to recognize the beautiful bird he had seen caged in the Witch's fir.

"The caged bird!" he cried to Ivra. "It is free! It is flying away."

The Bird Fairies were flying away, too. They were going to meet the birds coming up from the south and teach them their songs as they flew. They came to say good-by to the children.

"Look for us next winter," they called back, as they fluttered off in a silvery cloud.

And finally, at high noon, just as Ivra had known she would since early morning, Helma came,—running through the forest, jumping the hedge, and gathering Ivra and Eric into her arms.

They three knelt on the ground by the spring flowers embracing each other for a long, long minute.

"Did you find the key to that gate?" Eric asked when his breath came back, "Or did they let you come at last."

"I didn't have to find the key, and they didn't let me come. They would never have done that. But the minute I had on a light spring frock I found I could climb the wall easily enough, and so I came running all the way. And now they shall never get me back behind doors again. I am *free!* I am as free as you, my children!"

She held them off and looked into their eyes.

She was dressed in a brown silk gown, all torn and stained from her wall-climbing and rush through the bushes. Her feet were bare, for she had kicked off her funny high-heeled city boots the minute she had reached the forest. Her hair had grown to her shoulders and looked more like flower petals than ever. But her face was not brown and serene, as Eric had first seen it. It was pale and wild.

"They don't believe in you, children," she said. "They don't believe in me, not the me that I am. And from morning

to night they made me a slave. They made me wear such ugly, hurting things, and then they made me dance! Every night we danced in hot rooms and ate strange bad-tasting food. They called dancing like that a *party*. But I could only remember our forest parties, and our dancing here under the cool moon.

"The only glimpse of the forest I had was your Snow Witches, Ivra. Sometimes I saw them from my bedroom window, 'way out in the fields, whirling and scudding in mad games. And then at last one morning some Wind Creatures flew by, above the garden wall! But when I called Wild Star back and tried to ask him about you, children, as he perched on the wall, they came rushing into the garden and dragged me away. They said it was time for luncheon, and I must change my frock. But let us forget. I am here! It is spring!"

She jumped up and stood just as the Tree Girl had stood earlier that morning, her face lifted in the wind. Slowly that face grew calm and warm color flooded it.

"How nicely cleaned the house is!" she exclaimed when at last they went in. For she did not see the tracks on the floor nor the clouded windows. All she saw was that the children had worked there to make it fit for her home-coming.

Ivra was proud and glad that she noticed. "I have made you a spring frock too," she said, bringing it out. "And Eric has made you some sandals. He makes fine sandals now!"

The frock was a brown smock with a narrow green belt.

The sandals were well made, and very soft and light.

Helma stripped off the tattered silk frock, the funny thing with its long sleeves and stiff lace collar, and hid it away out of sight. On went the new smock over her head in a twinkling. She stepped into the sandals. And there was their mother, the Helma Eric had first seen.

"The garden now, we must see about that," she said in her old quiet way.

Then they went out into the garden, and Helma began to plan just where they should plant seeds and just what must be done. The children clung to her hands, looking up into her face, and would not let her take a step away from them. When she stood still they leaned against her, one against either side, and wound their arms about her.

In mid-afternoon, Spring came—not the spring of the year, but Spring himself, the person the season is named for. He was a tall young man, with a radiant face, and fair curls lifting in a cloud from his head. Where he walked the earth sprang up in green grass after his bare feet, and flowers followed him like a procession. Helma ran to him, swifter than the children, and he kissed her lips. He lifted Ivra high on his shoulder for one minute where she thought she looked away over the tree-tops hundreds of miles to the blue ocean. But it may have been only his eyes, which were very blue, that she was looking into.

With him came two Earth Giants. They were huge brown fellows with rolling muscles and kind, sleepy eyes. They crouched down at the opening in the hedge and waited for Spring to go on with them.

"Shall we plant the garden, Helma?" asked Spring.

"Yes, yes," cried the children, and Helma said, "Yes, yes," as eagerly as they.

So the Earth Giants came in and plowed it all up with their hands,—hands twenty times as large as an Earth Man's! When they were done, the garden was a rich golden color, and right for planting. Then Helma pointed out to Spring where she wanted the seeds to be, violets here, roses there, lilies there, pansies there and daisies there. Spring gave some seeds to

the children and sowed some himself. Helma sat on the door stone and joyously directed the work.

By twilight the garden was done, and Spring went away with his Earth Giants.

As he went out through the forest, flowers and green grass followed him—and the next morning even the dullest Earth Person would know that Spring had come.

As for Helma and Ivra and Eric, the house would not hold their joy, and so they dragged out their beds and slept that night in the new-plowed, sweet-smelling garden.

CHAPTER XV

SPRING WANDERING

"THERE goes another," said Helma as she stood in the door the very next morning after her return. "The littlest Forest Child that was, and all by himself. He seems rather small to go spring-wandering alone."

"He likes to go alone," Ivra answered. She was setting the table for breakfast, and Eric was helping her. " 'Most always he's playing or wandering off by himself somewhere."

Helma stood watching the little fellow until he had vanished amid the delicate green of the forest morning. Then she tossed back her hair with a shake of her head and cried gayly, "Let's go wandering ourselves, pets. It's good to be home, but we have all our lives for that now. Let's adventure!"

The children were overjoyed. They did not want to wait for breakfast. But Helma thought they had better, for no one knew where, when or how their next meal would be. Of course, though, it was hard to eat. You know yourself how you feel about food when you are going on an adventure. However the bowls of cereal were swallowed somehow. Then the stoutest sandals were strapped on. and the three were ready to set out.

First they went to Nora's farm and before they had waited many minutes in the shadow of the trees on the edge of the field Nora came from the door carrying their jug of milk. They ran to meet her and tell her not to leave any more milk until

they should come back. How glad the old woman was to see Helma. "I thought spring would bring you," she said. "Spring frees everything."

Then Helma, Ivra and Eric were off for their spring wandering. It seemed as though every one else was wandering, too, for they could hardly walk a mile without meeting some friend or stranger Forest Person. All gave them greeting, whether stranger or friend, and all looked very glad that Helma was in the forest again, for good news travels fast there, and even the strangers knew of her home-coming.

In a secret wooded valley, walking softly to hear the birds and the thousand little other songs of earth, they suddenly came upon a strange and thrilling sight. A party of little girls and boys all in bright colored frocks, purple, orange, green, blue, yellow, were putting the finishing touches on an air-boat they were making. It was built of delicate leaved branches and decorated with wild flowers. A great anchor of dog-tooth violets hung over the sides and kept it on the ground.

When they saw Helma and the children coming so silently toward them they jumped into the boat and crowded there looking like a bunch of larger spring flowers. Then they drew in the anchor rapidly. But the little girl sitting high in the back, the one in the torn yellow dress and with blowing cloud-dark hair, cried, "Oh, no fear, it's Ivra and her mother and the clear-eyed Earth Child. Want to come, Ivra? We're off spring wandering among the white clouds."

Ivra shook her head and called, "Not unless three of us can come."

"Too full for that," called down the yellow-frocked one, for now the boat had lifted softly almost to the tree tops. "Your Earth Child would weigh us down. So hail and farewell. Good wandering!"

So the three on the ground stood looking up and waving and calling back, "Good wandering!" until the green boat had drifted away and away and was lost in the spring sky. But for a long time after, there floated down to them in the valley far laughter and glad cries.

The spring nights were cold, and so at twilight they made themselves a shelter of boughs. They slept as soon as it was night and woke and were off at the break of dawn. Helma carried sweet chocolate in her pockets, and forest friends and strangers offered them from their store all along the way. Sometimes when they were tired or warm with walking they would climb into the top of some tall tree, and there swinging among the cool new leaves, Helma began telling them her World Stories again, while the children looked off over the trembling forest roof and watched for homing birds.

But when the hemlock and fir trees began to crowd out the maples and oaks, Helma said quietly one day, "We are nearing the sea." "The sea," cried Eric almost wild with sudden delight. "Shall we see it? Shall we swim in it? Oh, I have never seen it!"

"Oh, I saw it from Spring's shoulder," Ivra cried—she really thought she had—"But mother, mother, what a wonderful surprise you had for us!"

They began to run in their eagerness. But Helma held them back. "It's a day's journey yet," she said. And so they walked as patiently as they could down a long, long slope through dark firs and hemlocks.

It was noon of the following day when they finally came to the sea. They had struggled through a thick undergrowth of thorned bushes where the great arms of the firs shut out everything ahead. Then suddenly they were out of it, in the open, on the shore with the waves almost lapping their toes.

It was high tide. The blue sea stretched away to the blue sky.

Eric's legs gave way under him, and he knelt on the white sand, just looking and looking at the bigness of it, the splendor of it, the color of it, and listening to the music of it. Ivra ran right out into the foam brought in by the breakers, up to her waist, where she splashed the water with her palms until her hair and face were drenched with salt spray. Helma stood looking away to foreign countries which she could almost see.

But they were not left long to themselves. The heads of a little girl and boy and a young woman appeared over the crest of a great wave, and the three were swept up to the shore. They grabbed Ivra and drew her along with them as they passed, laughing musically. Ivra did not like it at first, and sprang away from them the minute she could shake herself free. But when she saw their merry faces and heard them laugh, she returned shyly.

The children were about Eric's and Ivra's ages, and the young woman was their mother. The children's names were Nan and Dan, and the woman's name was Sally. But though they had Earth-names they were of the fairy-kind,—called in the Forest "Blue Water People."

Just peer into a clear pool or stream, almost any bright day, and you will be pretty sure to see one of them looking up at you. They are the sauciest and most mischievous of all fairies. Only stare at them a little, and they will mock you to your face with smiles and pouts, and will not go away as long as you stay. For they have no fear of you or any Earth People. They follow their streams right into towns and cities, under bridges and over dams. You are as likely to find one in your city park as in the Forest.

Helma spoke to Sally, while the children eyed each other

curiously. She said, "How happy you Blue Water People must be now Spring has freed you at last!"

Sally dropped down on the beach, her dark hair flung like a shadow on the sand. Her laughing face looked straight up into the sky. She stretched her arms above her head.

"He came just in time. Another day—and we would have had to break through the ice ourselves. Truly. We've never had such a long winter. Why, a *month* ago we began to look for Spring. We lay with our faces pressed against the cold ice for hours at a time, watching. We could just see light through, and shadows now and then."

"And then I saw him first," cried Dan, who was listening to his mother.

"No, I!" cried Nan.

"No, no," Sally laughed. "I heard him, singing, a long way off. And I called you children away from your game of shells. When his foot touched the ice we danced in circles of joy, and tapped messages through to him with our fingers. The ice vanished under his feet, and our stream rushed hither away to the sea. We came with it, and waved him hail and farewell as we poured down. Who can stop at home in spring-time? And we had been ice-bound so long!"

"And now we're here," boasted Dan, "I'm going to swim across the sea to-morrow,—or the next day!"

"You're too little for that. Calm water is best, or little rushing streams," warned Sally.

"What is it like across the sea?" asked Eric. "Another world?"

"I'll tell you about it in the next story," promised Helma. "And then when I have told you, Eric, you may want to go across yourself and see the wonders."

Eric drew a deep breath. "Yes, you and Ivra and I. In a

boat." He pointed to a white sail far out stuck up like a feather slantwise in the water.

Ivra clapped her hands.

But Helma shook her head. "When you go, it must be alone. Ivra and I belong to the Forest."

"Why, then I don't want to go, ever." Eric shook the thought from him like water.

"Well, let's swim across now," Dan shouted, and ran into the waves, falling flat as soon as he was deep enough and swimming fast away. The other children followed him, ready for a frolic. You or I would have found that water very cold, but these were hardy children; and one of them all winter had made comrades of the Snow Witches, remember.

They waded out to the surf and plunged through it, head first. They took hands and floated in a circle beyond, rising and falling in the even motion of the rollers. Nan was very mischievous, and soon succeeded in pushing Eric out, under where the waves broke. When he looked up suddenly and saw the great watery roof hanging over him, he was terrified but he did not scream. People who comraded with Ivra could not do that. He shut his eyes tight, and then thundering down came the water-roof, and a second after, up bobbed Eric like a cork, choking and sputtering. They were laughing at him, even Ivra. The minute the salt water was out of his eyes he laughed, too, and tried to push Nan into the surf. But she was too quick for him, and slipped away, farther out to sea.

Then began a game of water tag. Eric, because he was not such a good swimmer as the others, was It most of the time. But Ivra had to take a few turns as well. It was impossible to catch the other two. They moved in the water as reflected light

moves along a wall, not really swimming at all, but flashing from spot to spot.

Helma and Sally lay on the sand in the spring sunshine and talked about their children.

"Nan and Dan tear their clothes so," sighed Sally, "I could spend all my time mending."

"I must make little Eric some new clothes," said Helma. "I hope I have cloth enough at home."

"Nan is naughty, but she is a darling," laughed Sally as Eric was pushed under the surf.

Helma waited to see that he came up smiling and then said, "Ivra and Eric never quarrel. They play together from morn till night like two squirrels."

. . . . They all had lunch together on the shore. The Blue Water Children instead of eating smelled some spring flowers which Sally had found. That is the way they always take their nourishment. Helma turned some little cakes of chocolate out of her pockets, and though at first it seemed like a small luncheon, when it was all eaten they felt satisfied.

All the afternoon the children played up and down the beach. They found a smooth round pink sea-shell which they used for a ball. Eric was the best at throwing. It made him happy and proud to excel in something at last. He taught them how to play base ball, which he had once watched Mrs. Freg's boys playing on Sundays in the back yard. They used a piece of drift wood for a bat, and when the shell got accidentally batted into the sea the Blue Water Children fielded it like fishes.

When they were tired of ball, the Blue Water Children drew lines on the sand for "hop scotch,"—a game they had sometimes watched city children playing in a park,—and taught Ivra and Eric about that.

Then they built a castle of sand, and walled it in with sea shells. Helma showed them how to make the moat and the bridge, and Sally and she took turns and made up a story about the castle and told it to them.

Towards evening some Earth People came by, near to the shore, in a little steam launch. There were men and women and several children in it. They crowded into the side of the boat towards the shore to stare curiously at Helma and Eric. They could not see the others, of course. Helma with her free, bright hair and bare feet looked very strange to them. And they could not understand what Eric was doing with his arms held straight out at each side. He was between Dan and Nan, holding their hands, and standing to watch. But the Earth People looked right through the Blue Water Children, or thought they were shadows perhaps.

One of the men put his hands to his mouth like a megaphone and called to Helma, asking her if she did not want to be picked up. They thought her being there in that wild place with a little boy, alone, and barefooted, very singular. They thought she might have been shipwrecked. But Helma shook her head, and so they had to take their wonder away with them. The boat swept by.

Ivra ran out into the waves waist deep to watch the strange thing. She had never seen a steam launch before, or anything like it. A baby, held in his nurse's arms, caught sight of her and waved tiny dimpled hands, calling and cooing. She saw his sparkling eyes, his light fuzzy hair, his little white dress and socks. She ran farther into the water, waving back to him and throwing him dozens of kisses. But no one else in the boat saw her, and after a minute the baby's attention turned to a sea gull flying overhead.

Ivra returned to shore, her face shining. There had been

no doubt of it—the baby had seen her at once, and had had no doubts. He had laughed and reached his hands to her. The little Fairy Child almost hugged herself with delight. . . .

They built themselves shelters of drift wood when night fell. Eric's was just large enough for him to crawl into and lie still. One whole side of it was open to the sea. Soft fir boughs made his bed, and Helma had left a kiss with him. But he did not sleep for a long while. He lay on his side looking out over the star-sprinkled water and up at the star-flowering sky. And he could not have told how or from where the command had come, but he knew as he looked that he must cross that sea and go into the new world beyond it and see all things for himself. World Stories were good. But they were not enough.

How he was to go, or how live when he got there—he did not once think of that. Just that he *was* to go filled his whole mind. He forgot that he had said he would not go without Helma and Ivra. He did not think of them at all. He just lay still listening to the sea's command to go beyond and beyond.

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CHAPTER XVI

OVER THE TREE TOPS

HE was waked by Ivra's joyous cries just at dawn, and rolled out of his shelter, rubbing his eyes and stretching his arms and legs. But as soon as his eyes were well open he jumped up and uttered a cry of joy himself. For hanging just above the water on the edge of the sea was a great blue sea-shell air-boat with blue sails; and the Tree Mother stood in it, talking to Helma and Ivra who had run down to the water's edge.

The boat and the sails were blue. Tree Mother's gown was blue. The sea and the sky were blue. Tiny white caps feathered the water. Tiny white clouds feathered the sky. And Tree Mother's hair was whiter and more feathery than either. Her eyes were dark like the Tree Man's, only keener and softer, both. And in spite of her being a grandmother her face was brown and golden like a young out-of-door girl's, and she was slim and quick and more than beautiful. Eric stood beside Ivra, his face lifted up to the Tree Mother's, aglow and quivering.

"She is going to take us home," Ivra said softly.

Then Tree Mother turned the boat, and it drifted in and down on the sand. The children and Helma climbed in. The Tree Mother said very little on the long ride, but her presence was enough. The three were almost trembling for joy, for the Tree Mother's companionship is rare, and one of the splendidest things that can happen to a Forest Person.

The minute they were in the boat, it shot up and away towards home.

"Where are the Blue Water Children?" Eric cried, suddenly remembering their playmates of yesterday.

"Have you been playing with Blue Water Children?" asked Tree Mother. "They are gypsy-folk and you never know where you will find them next. They are probably miles away by now."

"Faster, faster, Tree Mother," begged Ivra, who was hanging over the side of the boat and losing herself in joy with the motion and height.

"Faster?" said the Tree Mother. "Then take care! Hold on!"

The boat shot forward with a sudden rush. The spring air changed from cool feathers to a sharp wing beating their faces. Eric and Ivra slipped to the floor and lay on their backs. They dared not sit up for fear of being swept overboard. They could see nothing but the sky from where they lay, but they loved the speed, and clapped their hands, and Ivra cried, "Faster, faster!"

The Tree Mother laughed. "These are brave children," she thought. "Shut your eyes then," she said, "and don't try too hard to breathe."

They swept on more swiftly than a wild-goose, so swiftly that soon the children could neither hear, speak nor see. And then at last they were traveling so fast that it felt as though the boat were standing perfectly still in a cold dark place.

Gradually light began to leak through their shut eyelids, the wing of the wind beat away from them, and the boat rocked slower and slower in warm, spring-scented air. But in that brief time, they had traveled many, many miles.

Now when the children leaned over the side, they saw

that they were sailing slowly over their own Forest. The tree tops were like a restless green sea just a little beneath them. They flew low enough to hear bird calls and the voices of the streams.

It was then they suddenly noticed that the littlest of the Forest Children was there curled up fast asleep at Tree Mother's feet. Ivra cried to him in surprise, and he woke slowly, stretching his little brown legs, shaking his curly head, and lifting a sleepy face. He was puzzled at seeing others beside Tree Mother in the boat. He had been riding and awake with her all night up near the stars, and had dropped to sleep as the stars faded.

She bent now and took his hand. "I picked these wanderers up at dawn," she said, "and now we are all going back together. We are well on the way."

They had left the forest roof and were sailing over open country,—a short cut, Tree Mother explained.

"Oh, look," cried Ivra excitedly, almost tumbling over the edge in her endeavor to see better, "isn't that the gray wall off there?"

Yes, it was the gray wall, the gray wall that had prisoned their mother all winter. The boat went slower and slower as they neared it and then almost hung still over the garden. The garden was full of people, having some kind of a party, for many little tables were set there with silver and glass that shone brilliantly in the sun. Servants were hurrying back and forth carrying trays and their gilt buttons sparkled almost as much as the silver.

But how strange were the people! Eric and Ivra and the littlest Forest Child laughed aloud. They were standing about so straight and stiff, holding their cups and saucers, and their

voices rising up to the air-boat in confusion sounded like a hundred parrots.

"Why don't they sit down on the grass to eat?" wondered the littlest Forest Child. "And why don't they wash their feet in the fountain? They look so very hot and walk as though it hurt!"

"Sitting on the grass and washing their feet in the fountain is against the law there," Helma said.

But neither Ivra nor the littlest Forest Child knew what "against the law" meant. Eric knew, however, for he had lived nine years, remember, where most everything a little boy wanted *was* against the law.

"But why do they stay?" Eric asked.

Helma looked a little grave. "Why did you stay, dear, for nine long years?"

He thought a minute. "I hadn't seen the magic beckoning," he answered then.

"Neither have they," she said, "and perhaps never will, for their eyes are getting dimmer all the time."

"But how can they *help* seeing it?" cried the littlest Forest Child. "See, all around the garden!"

It was true. All around the garden the tall trees stood and beckoned with their high fingers, beckoned away and away with promise of magic beyond magic. But the people in the garden never lifted their eyes to see it. They were looking intently into their tea cups as though it might be there magic was waiting.

"They are prisoners," said Tree Mother, "just as you were, Helma, with this one difference. You were locked in, but they have locked themselves in and carry their keys like precious things next their hearts."

Helma sighed and laughed at once. Then she leaned far

out and tossed a daffodil she was carrying down on the heads in the garden, shaking her short, flower petal hair as she did it—she had cut it before starting on the adventure—in a free, glad way.

No one looked up to see where the flower had dropped from. The people down there were not interested in offerings from the heavens. So the boat sailed on. Away and away over the canning factory they drifted, where the little girl looked out from her window and up, and waved her hands. "What are you waving at like that?" a man asked who was working near. "Oh, just a white summer cloud," she said. For she knew very well he did not want the truth. And I might as well tell you here that that pale little girl was a prisoner who had not turned the lock herself, and did not carry the key next her heart. Others had done that before she was born. And she had seen the beckoning in spite of the lock and now was only waiting a little while to answer it.

The children were glad to find the forest roof beneath them again. It was noon when they sank down in the garden at their own white door stone. Tree Mother left them there and flew away with the littlest Forest Child, the one who liked to wander alone by himself.

Nora was in the house when they ran in. She had cleaned it with a different cleaning from what it had had for Helma's first return. There were no little foot prints on the floor now, and the window panes shone like clear pools in sunlight. Three dishes of early strawberries and three deep bowls of cream were standing on the table before the open door. And then besides there was a big loaf of golden-brown bread.

"I thought you would be hungry," said Nora, pointing to the feast.

They were hungry indeed, for they had had nothing at all

to eat since yesterday's lunch of chocolate. They very soon finished the strawberries and cream, and a jug of milk besides.

"You are a good neighbor, Nora," Helma said gratefully.

All Nora wanted in return for her labor and kindness was the story of their adventure. She listened eagerly to every word. "I shall tell this to my grandchildren," she said when the story was done, "and they will think it just a fairy tale. They'll never believe it's fairy truth! Oh, if they would only stop pretending to be so wise they themselves might some time get the chance of a ride over the tree tops with Tree Mother. But they never will. Come play with them again sometime, Eric. They often talk about you."

"I'll come to-day and bring Ivra if they'll play with her, too!"

But Nora shook her head as she went away. "They don't believe in Ivra. How could they play with her? Their grandmother can teach them nothing. But they'll like the story of this adventure none the less for not believing it."

When she was gone the three took the dishes into the house and washed them. Then they went out and worked in the garden until dusk.

CHAPTER XVII

THE JUNE MOON

NOW every day Eric was becoming acquainted with strange Forest People: those who had hidden away from winter in trees, and those who were wandering up from the south along with the birds, and Blue Water People, of course, all along the Forest streams. The Forest teemed with new playmates for him and Ivra.

Hide-and-go-seek was still the favorite game. And now it was more fun to be "It" than to be hiding almost, for one was likely to come upon strangers peeping out of tree hollows, swimming under water, or swinging in the tree tops, any minute. When the person who was "It" came across one of these strangers he would simply say, "I spy, and you're It." Then he would draw the stranger away to the goal, where he usually joined the game and was as much at home as though he had been playing in it from the very first.

The day that Eric found Wild Thyme so was the best of all,—or rather she was the best of all. And that was strange, for when he first spied her he did not like her at all. Her dress was a purple slip just to her knees, with a big rent in the skirt. Her hair was short and bushy and dark. And her face was soberer than most Forest People's faces. She was sitting out at the edge of the Forest on a flat rock, her chin in her hands, and she did not look eager to make friends with any one.

But he cried, "I spy! You're It!" just the same. She did not lift her eyes. She only said, "You must catch me first. I am Wild Thyme, and that will be hard!"

Eric laughed, for she was not a yard away from him. And he sprang forward as he laughed. But she was quicker than he. She had been at perfect rest on the rock, her chin in her hands, and not looking at him, but the instant he jumped she was off like a flash, a purple streak across the field.

But Eric did not let his surprise delay him. He ran after her just as fast as he could, and that was very, very fast, for running with Ivra had taught him to run faster than most Earth Children ever dream of running. Soon, Wild Thyme slowed down a little, and faced him, running backward, her bushy hair raised from her head in the wind of her running, her little brown face and great purple eyes gleaming mischievously. Eric sprang for her. She dodged. He sprang again. She dodged again. He cried out in vexation and sprang again, straight and sure. He caught her by her bushy hair as she turned to fly.

And a strange thing happened to him in that second, the second he caught her hair. Instead of Wild Thyme and the sunny field, he was looking at the sea. He was standing on the shore, looking away and away, almost to foreign lands. Now ever since that spring night on the shore he had been thinking of the sea and longing with all his might to cross it and see foreign lands for himself. Only that had seemed impossible, and something he must surely wait till he was grown up to do. But now, in a flash, as his fingers closed on Wild Thyme's hair, he knew that he could indeed do that, and anything else he really set his heart on.

No girl, even a fairy, likes to have her hair pulled. So Wild Thyme was angry. She pinched Eric's arm with all

her strength. Then *he* was angry. And so they stood holding each other, he her by the hair, and she him by the arm, staring hotly into each other's faces. But slowly they relaxed, and becoming their own natural selves again, broke into laughter.

"You'll play with us, won't you?" Eric asked.

"Of course," she said, "and I *am* It!" And away they ran to find the others, Ivra, the Tree Girl, the Forest Children, and Dan and Nan. When those saw who it was Eric had captured they ran to meet her, shouting gayly, "Wild Thyme! Goody! Goody! Hello, Wild Thyme!" They seemed to have known her always. She and Ivra threw their arms about each other's shoulders and danced away to the goal.

Wild Thyme was a wonderful playfellow. She was so wild, so free, so strong, so mischievous. And when the game was ended she invited them to a dance that very night. "It's to be around the Tree Man's Tree," she said. "And all come —come when the moon rises."

. . . Perhaps Eric's good times in the Forest reached their very height that June night of the dance. He had never been to a dance before, and just at first he did not think there would be much fun in it. But Ivra wanted him to go, and offered to show him about the dances. So they ran away from the others to the edge of the field where Eric had discovered Wild Thyme, and there on the even, grassy ground Ivra showed him how to dance. It was very easy,—not at all like the dances Earth Children dance. It was much more fun, and much livelier. The dances were just whirling and skipping and jumping, each dancer by himself, but all in a circle. Eric liked it as well as though it had been a new game.

Late that afternoon Helma and Ivra and Eric gathered ferns and flowers to deck themselves for the evening. They

put them on over the stream, which was the only mirror in the Forest.

Helma made a girdle of brakes for herself, and a dandelion wreath for her hair. She wove a dear little cap of star flowers for Ivra, and a chain of them for her neck. Eric crowned himself with bloodroot and contrived grass sandals for his feet. But the sandals, of course, wore through before the end of the first dance and fell off.

They had a splendid supper of raspberries and cream, which they sat on the door stone to eat, and then told stories to each other, while they waited for the moon to rise. It came early, big and round and yellow, shining through the trees, flooding the aisles of the Forest with silver light until they looked like still streams, and the trees like masts of great ships standing in them.

Then the three hurried away to the Tree Man's. They ran hand in hand through the forest aisles, their faces as bright to each other as in daylight. But before they even came in sight of the tree they heard music.

"Thrum, thrum, thrum, thrummmm, thrummmmmmmmmmmm." Very soft, very insistent, very simple and strangely thrilling. When they came to the tree, there were the Forest Children, who had come early, whirling around in a circle, and the Tree Girl in the center of the circle making music with a tiny instrument she held in one hand and touched with the fingers of the other.

Soon Forest People began arriving from every direction. There were the Blue Water Children, bright pebbles around their necks, and white sea shells in their blue hair. The Forest Children were crowned with maidenhair fern. The Tree Girl was the most beautiful of all in her silver cobweb frock and her cloudy hair. The Tree Man stood still in the shadow,

but his long white beard gleamed out, and his deep eyes. Wild Thyme wore a rope of the flower that is named for her around her neck, but there was a new rent in her purple frock and her legs were scratched as though she had remembered her dance only the last minute and come plunging the shortest way through bushes, which was true.

Thrum, thrum, thrum, thrummmmmmmmmm.

Every one except the Tree Man was dancing, bewitched in the moonlight, all over the grassy space around the great tree. The grass was cool and refreshing under Eric's bare feet, and he often dug his bare toes into the soft earth at its roots as he leapt or ran just to make sure he was on earth at all. For he felt as though he were swimming in moonlight, or at least treading it.

Thrum, thrum, thrum, thrummmmmmmmmm.

When the Tree Girl's music stopped between dances, then it would go on in Eric's head. It was just the sound of the night after all. Once Eric noticed that the Beautiful Wicked Witch was dancing next to him in the circle but he was not afraid of her there with the others, and in bright moonlight. And she was plotting no ill. Her face was sparkling with delight and she had utterly forgotten herself in the dance.

When the great moon hung just above them, and shadows were few and far between, the Tree Mother came walking through the Forest, quieter and more beautiful than the moon. Wild Thyme ran to her and laid her bushy head against her breast. For Wild Thyme only of all the Forest People loved her without awe. The Tree Mother put her hand on Wild Thyme's head and stood to watch the dancing. Her robe gleamed like frost, and her hair was a pool of light above her head.

Thrum, thrum, thrum, thrummmmmmmmm.

"EVERYONE WAS DANCING, BEWITCHED IN THE MOONLIGHT, ALL OVER THE GRASSY SPACE AROUND THE GREAT TREE."—*Page 110.*

Wild Thyme jumped back into the dance and the Tree Mother stood alone. But although she stood as still as a moonbeam under the tree, she made Eric think of dancing more than all the others put together. It was her eyes. The thrum, thrum, thrum, thrummmmmmmmmm was in them, and the rest of that night Eric felt as though the music-instrument the Tree Girl was swinging was silent, and that all the music flowed from Tree Mother.

But Eric, after all, was only an Earth Child, and his legs got very tired in spite of the music and the moonlight. So at last he slipped out of the circle, and stumbling with weariness and sleepiness went to Tree Mother. She picked him up in her arms, and the minute his head touched her shoulder he was sound asleep, the music at last hushed in his head.

When he woke it was summer dawn. The birds were flitting above in the tree-boughs and making high singing. He was alone, lying beneath a silver birch, his head among the star flowers.

He knew that Helma and Ivra had not wanted to wake him, but had gone home when the moon set, and were waiting breakfast for him there now. So he jumped up and ran home through the dew.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE DEEPEST PLACE IN THE WOOD

IT was on the hottest day of all the hot days of summer that Eric found the deepest place in the Forest. He wandered into it while he was looking for Wild Thyme. Ivra had been no good to him that day. She was usually ready to play in any weather; but on this, the hottest day of the year, she stayed indoors, where it was a little cooler, and lying on the settle she drew paper dolls on birch bark, and afterwards cut them out. Yes, even fairy children love paper dolls and Ivra loved them more than most. Eric wanted her to go swimming in the stream, but he teased her to in vain, for she was entranced with the dolls and would hardly lift her eyes from them.

Helma was swinging in a vine swing she had made for herself high in a tree above the garden. One of the Little People was perched on a leaf just over her head, and they were chattering together like equals. Their eager voices floated down to Eric standing disconsolate near the door stone. But Helma usually knew when her children were in trouble, no matter how tiny the trouble, and so before Eric had stood there long or dug up more than a bushel of earth with his bare toes, she leaned over the nest and called to him.

"Why don't you go and play with Wild Thyme? She doesn't mind the heat. Every one else is staying quiet till sundown."

Wild Thyme was a happy thought, and Eric walked away in search of her. But she was in the very last place he would have thought to look on such a scorching day, and that is how he missed her. She was lying full length on the hot burnt grass in the field at the Forest's edge, loving the heat and sunshine, which covered her like a mantle. If Eric had seen her it is probable he would not have known her or stopped to look twice. He would have thought her just a little patch of the flower that is named for her.

So he wandered on and on, looking high and low and all about for her, and he went deeper and deeper into the Forest. The deeper he went the cooler it became, for the forest roof kept out the sunshine. The light grew dimmer and dimmer too. Eric had never been so far in before and everything was strange to him.

He saw no Forest People except a little brown goblin who peered at him from some underbrush and then scuttled away into the darkness of denser brush. Eric had never seen a goblin before, but he had no fear of goblins, and so this one did not bother him at all. He heard others scuttling and squeaking, and one threw a chunk of gray moss at him. He stopped and picked it up and threw it back with a laugh in the direction it had come from.

"Come out and play, why don't you?" he called. "I know where there's a fine swimming pool." But there was no answer to his invitation. Instead there was sudden and utter silence. He was disappointed, for he did want a playmate, and he had almost given up looking for Wild Thyme.

After walking for a long while he came at last to one of the windings of the Forest stream, and gratefully stepped into the shallow, clear water, dark with shadows. His feet were burning, and his head was hot. So he drank a long drink of

the cold, delicious water, ducked his head, and finally washed his face. Then he waded on with no purpose in mind now but just to keep his feet in the water.

It was so he came to the deepest place; where not even Ivra had ever been. It was almost cool there, and more like twilight than early afternoon. And right in the deepest place, in a nest of smooth leaves, with his feet in the water, lay Wild Star. When Eric first caught sight of him he thought he was asleep, for his wings were lying on the leaves half folded and dropped, and his knees were higher than his head. But when Eric went close enough to see his eyes he knew that he was very wide awake, for they were wide open, watchful and intent,—and purple like the early morning. Such wide-awake eyes were startling in such a sleepy, still place. Eric expected him to spread his wings in a flash and dart away. But the wings stayed half open, purple shadows on the leaves, and Wild Star did not even raise his head. Only his eyes greeted Eric.

But Eric knew without words that Wild Star was glad to see him. So he stepped up out of the water and stretched himself on a mound of silvery moss near by. With his chin resting in his palms and his elbows supporting, he faced the Wind Creature, his clear blue eyes open to the intent purple ones.

It was Wild Star who spoke first.

"I thought, little Eric, you would have crossed the sea before this, and be out of the Forest. I expected to find you next fall on the other side of the world."

Eric was amazed, for he had not said one word of his dream about that to any one. "How did you know I wanted to go?" he cried.

"Oh, you are an Earth Child, after all, and I knew you would want to be going on, as soon as you saw the sea."

"But *why* do I want to go on?" asked Eric, his face clouding with the puzzle of it. "I am so happy here, and Helma is my mother now. There can't be another mother across the sea for me. And if there were I wouldn't want her,—not after Helma! No, Helma is my only mother, and Ivra is my comrade. And still I want to leave them,—and go on and away over there. It is very funny."

"No," said Wild Star. "It isn't funny. You are a growing Earth Child, not a fairy. It is your own kind calling you. It is the music of your human life."

"I don't know what you mean," said Eric.

"It is like this: you know when you begin to sing a song, you go on and on to the end without thinking about it at all. It is the theme that carries you. Well, a human life is made like a song,—it carries itself along. You do not stop to think why. It can't stop in the middle, on one chord, for long. Yours now is resting, on a chord of happiness. But soon it will go on again. You want it to. Life in the Forest, though, isn't like that. Here it is music without any theme, like the music we dance to. Thrum, thrum, thrum, thrummmmmmmm. But there is more than that to an Earth Child's life. It runs on like this stream. The stream is happy here in the Forest, too, but it goes on seeking the sea just the same."

There was a long stillness while Eric looked down into the green depths of the water. At last he asked, "But how could I ever get across the sea? And when I got there how could I get back?"

"Time enough to think about getting back when you are there," laughed Wild Star. "But as to getting there, Helma is the one to tell you that. She has been an Earth Child, too,

you know. She felt just as you did, that spring night on the shore. She has felt it many times. It is only Ivra that keeps her in the Forest. Ivra does not belong out in the world of humans, and Helma will never leave her. But she will understand your longing. All you have to do is tell her."

Eric clapped his hands, a habit he had caught from Ivra. "Oh, I shall cross in a ship," he cried, "and see all the foreign lands. And when I come back, think of the World Stories I shall have to tell Helma and Ivra!"

He sprang up in his joy, and felt as though he had wings on his shoulders like Wild Star, and had only to spread them out to go beating around the world. For a second the Wind Creature and the Earth Child looked very much alike. And indeed, the only difference was that Wild Star had to wait for the wind, and Eric need wait for no wind or no season. His wings were *inside of his head*, but they were as strong as Wild Star's. And he had only to spread them and lift them to go anywhere he wanted.

Now he wanted to get back to Helma and tell her all about it. Wild Star pointed him the shortest way, and off he ran, jumping the stream and the moss beds beyond, and disappearing into the underbrush.

"I'll look for you next time the other side of the world!" Wild Star shouted after him.

It was twilight when he reached home. Helma and Ivra were sitting on the door stone, hand in hand. They made room for Eric. But he did not snuggle up. He stayed erect, his face lifted towards the first dim stars, and told Helma all about his wanting to go away from them out through the Forest and across the sea, and all that Wild Star had said about music and Earth People's lives. And he told her, too, of the vision of

success he had had when he caught Wild Thyme that first day by her bushy hair.

Helma listened quietly, and said nothing for many minutes after he was through. But at last she spoke, putting a hushing hand on Eric's dreamful head.

"I understand," she said. "I knew you would want to go on sometime. And I have a friend across there who will help us. He has a school for boys and I got to know him very well behind the gray stone wall. He asked me about the Forest and you children. And he said that Eric sometime would surely want to go back to humans, and when he did he would help him. He understands boys. It is to him you had better go, Eric, and when you are really ready I will tell you how, and start you on your way."

Eric sighed with contentment, and leaned his head against Helma's shoulder.

But Ivra stayed at her mother's other side, as still and silent as a shadow. Soon the fireflies began their nightly dance in the garden. But Ivra did not go darting after them as usual to make their dance the swifter. And Eric's head was too full of dreams and his eyes too full of visions of the sea to notice them at all.

CHAPTER XIX

MORE MAGIC IN A MIST

INDIAN summer had come round again before Eric really made up his mind to go. The flowers were asleep in the garden, and there was a steady, gentle shower of yellow leaves down the Forest. That morning when he woke the little house seemed suspended in a golden mist. As he stood in the doorway he felt as though it might drift away up over the trees and into space any minute. But after a little he knew it was not Helma's little forest house that was to go swinging away into space and adventure,—it was himself. And suddenly he wanted to go *then*,—to the sea and over and beyond.

He called the news in to Helma and Ivra, who were still within doors. Helma came swiftly out to him.

"The trees are beckoning again, mother," he cried. "The way they did a year ago when I first came here. Now it is just as Wild Star said. The music is beginning to go on. There's magic out to-day. Oh, what made Wild Star know so much!"

"Sit down," said Helma. She took his hand and drew him down beside her on the door stone. Then she held it firmly while very slowly and distinctly, but once only, she gave him directions about how to go, where to go and what to do, so that he might follow the magic.

Eric sat and listened attentively, in spite of the high beating of his heart, and the magic working in his head. As soon as

she was done, he wanted to go right away that minute. For even in his happiness he knew that saying good-by to all his friends in the Forest would be too sad a task. *They* did not say good-by when they went on long adventures, or followed summer south. They simply disappeared one day, and those who stayed behind forgot them until next season. So Eric would do as they.

Only last week Helma had made him a warm brown suit for the coming winter. The new strong sandals on his feet he had made himself. His cap was new, too, and Helma had stuck two new little brown feathers in it as in the old one; so he still had a look of flying. There was really nothing to delay his departure further. Helma called to Ivra, and she came out slowly. There was no need to explain things to her, for she had heard everything.

Helma lifted Eric's chin in her palms and looked long and earnestly at the child she was letting go away from her all alone out into the queer world of Earth People. She picked him up in her strong arms then, as though he were a very little boy, and kissed him. She ran with him to the opening in the hedge and set him down there, laughing.

"Run along now 'round the world," she said. "And when you come back bring a hundred new World Stories with you!"

Eric laughed too, and promised and stood on tiptoes to kiss her again. He stroked her short flower petal hair, and kissed her cool brown cheek over and over. But he did not cling to her. And he did not say another word, but ran to catch up with Ivra who was to walk with him until noon and had gone on ahead.

The children did not scuffle through the banks of leaves, or jump and run and burst into play as they were used to doing. They walked steadily forward, saying very little, neither hurry-

ing nor delaying their steps. Once when Eric's sandal came untied Ivra knelt to fix it, for she was still more skillful with knots than he.

But when the sun showed that it was noon, Ivra's steps grew slower and slower, dragged and dragged, until at last she stood still in a billow of leaves.

"I have to go back now," she said.

In a flash all the magic swept out of the day for Eric. He knew he could never say good-by to Ivra, so he stayed silent, looking ahead into the fluttering, golden forest. But even as he looked the trees began to beckon with their high fingers, and 'way away, down long avenues of trees he *almost* glimpsed the sea.

Ivra threw her arms about his neck and kissed him. "Good-by, comrade," was all she said.

He kissed her cheeks. "I'll come back," he promised.

But before he had gone many steps he turned to see her again. She was standing in the billow of leaves, a lonely-looking little girl, her face paler than it had been even on that day of the wind-hunt. He wanted to run back to her and tell her he would be her playmate always, and never leave the Forest. But he wanted, too, to go on and across the sea and into foreign lands. He stayed irresolute.

And then quite suddenly, standing just behind Ivra, he saw Tree Mother. She was not looking at him at all, but at Ivra, and her eyes were kind stars. When Ivra turned to go home she must walk right into Tree Mother's arms and against her breast. So Eric was happy again. Ivra could not be lonely with dear Tree Mother. Perhaps she would take her up in her air-boat high above the falling leaves, where she could look down on the magic. He waved, calling, "Remember me to the Snow Witches when they come." That was not because he

really wanted to be remembered to them, but because he knew that Ivra liked them best of all, and it would please her.

She nodded and waved too, and threw him a kiss. Then a shower of fluttering leaves came between the playmates.

When it was clear again Eric had run on out of sight, and was lost to Ivra in the Forest. On and on and on through the showers of golden leaves he went, magic at his elbow and around him, and beckoning ahead of him. And after long walking and many thoughts, at last he did see the sea, gleaming blue and white sparkles between the golden trees.

CENTRAL CIRCULATION
CHILDREN'S ROOM